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THIS IS A MEETING WHICH THE PUBLIC ARE ENTITLED TO ATTEND

3rd December 2020

Dear Sir/Madam

SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

A meeting of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee will be held in virtually via Microsoft Teams - if you would like to attend this meeting live via Microsoft Teams please contact committee.services@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk on Thursday, 10th December, 2020 at 10.00 am.

Please note that a pre and post meeting will be held 30 minutes prior to the start and following the conclusion of the meeting for members of the committee.

Yours faithfully

Michelle Morris
Managing Director

AGENDA

Pages

1. SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION

You are welcome to use Welsh at the meeting, a minimum notice period of 3 working days is required

We welcome correspondence in the medium of Welsh or English. / Croesawn ohebiaith trwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg neu'r Saesneg.

should you wish to do so. A simultaneous translation will be provided if requested.

2. **APOLOGIES**

To receive.

3. **DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATION**

To consider any declarations of interests and dispensations made.

4. **SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES** 5 - 12

To receive the Minutes of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee held on 5th November, 2020.

(Please note the Minutes are submitted for points of accuracy only)

5. **INTEGRATED CARE FUND (ICF) UPDATE 2019/20** 13 - 22

To consider the report of the Head of Adult Services.

6. **NATIONAL ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20** 23 - 68

To consider the report of the Corporate Director Social Services.

7. **FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME: 21ST JANUARY 2021** 69 - 72

To receive the report.

To: Councillor S. Thomas (Chair)
Councillor K. Rowson (Vice-Chair)
Councillor D. Bevan
Councillor G. Collier
Councillor G. A. Davies
Councillor G. L. Davies
Councillor P. Edwards
Councillor K. Hayden
Councillor W. Hodgins
Councillor J. Holt

Councillor M. Moore
Councillor G. Paulsen
Councillor T. Sharrem
Councillor B. Summers
Councillor T. Smith

All other Members (for information)
Manager Director
Chief Officers

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COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO: **THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

SUBJECT: **SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 5TH NOVEMBER, 2020**

REPORT OF: **DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER**

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR S.C. THOMAS (CHAIR)

Councillors: K. Rowson
D. Bevan
G.A. Davies
P. Edwards
K. Hayden
J. Holt
M. Moore
G. Paulsen
T. Smith
B. Summers

AND: Corporate Director of Social Services
Head of Children's Services
Head of Adult Services
Communications & Policy Officer
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u> It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	
No. 2	<u>APOLOGIES</u> Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Collier, G.L. Davies and L. Elias.	

	<p>The Chair said that Councillor Elias had requested that the Director of Social Services pass on his thanks to the Head of Adult Services and her team for their help and quick response to a recent matter.</p>	
No. 3	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
No. 4	<p><u>SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The Minutes of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 17th September, 2020 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 5	<p><u>FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – 10TH DECEMBER, 2020</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme for the meeting on 10th December, 2020 be approved.</p>	
No. 6	<p><u>UPDATE ON STRATEGY TO SAFELY REDUCE THE NUMBERS OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Social Services which was presented to update Members on the progress made in relation to the implementation of the Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2017-2020.</p> <p>The Head of Children's Services spoke to the report and highlighted that the Strategy to Safely Reduce the numbers of Children Looked After had three objectives:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To support families to stay together. 2. To manage risk confidently and provide support at the edge of care. 	

3. To provide affordable high quality placements.

In response to a Member's question regarding foster carers, the Head of Children's Services said that it had been a challenge over the summer for the recruitment campaign. Heads of Service across Wales had been developing a national approach for local authorities to recruit foster carers. The brand 'Foster Wales' had been developed and funding of £300,000 had been allocated by the Welsh Government to support the 22 local authorities, and an official launch would take place next year. The number of foster carers in Blaenau Gwent remained constant, however, enquiries had increased in January/February 2020 but slowed in March due to the pandemic. The challenge for the Service was to transfer enquiries into approved foster carers as not all applications were successful. Consultation had been undertaken with existing foster carers regarding how they had been supported over the summer and the feedback had been extremely positive.

A Member enquired regarding the £400,000 overspend on legal costs, the Head of Children's Services explained that there were many different elements to each case and some may need a number of independent assessments that were commissioned through the court such as assessments of parents or of a sibling group. Another part of that overspend was the full year costs associated with external legal services as the Council's Child Care Solicitor had left the Authority. The Legal Department had gone through the procurement process to enquire if neighbouring authorities were interested in taking on this legal work, at that time there had been no take up of the offer, however, a neighbouring authority had since expressed an interest and the Directorate were now exploring this option.

In response to a Member's question regarding the Integrated Care Fund monies and how the Directorate was meeting the three objectives, the Head of Children's Services said that the Welsh Government had given verbal confirmation that the Integrated Care Fund would continue up to April/March 2022. In relation to meeting the three objectives, this was evidenced by a reduced number of children coming into care and demonstrated the important work of the Supporting Change Team in supporting families and how to manage risk confidently. As there was further

	<p>work to be carried out, the Directorate was in the process of developing a five year strategy.</p> <p>With regard to legal fees a Member felt that the Welsh Government should look at legal fees with a view to providing support for local authorities. He also enquired if collaboration with other authorities to bear part of the costs would take place. The Head of Children's Services said that each local authority had to manage their own budgets in relation to every aspect, including legal costs. In relation to collaboration with a neighbouring authority, work gathering information on the numbers of court applications made over the last five years was being undertaken to help the neighbouring authority manage capacity. Work was also being undertaken to identify how costs were attributed to solicitor's fees, assessments commissioned during the court process and application fees to the court. When collated all the information would be provided to the neighbouring authority and discussions would be ongoing.</p> <p>The Chair said that given the complexity and nature of the legal cases it was difficult for local authorities to be able to procure legal services at a lesser cost and felt that collaboration with partners may help alleviate some of the burden.</p> <p>With regard to recruitment of Child Care Solicitors, the Director of Social Services said that it was difficult to recruit legal professionals into local authorities as the Council was competing against private companies who paid higher wages.</p> <p>Members felt that it was a positive report with great strides being made in safely reducing the number of Children Looked After, but there were still some concerns regarding legal costs.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1, namely that the information contained within the report be accepted.</p>	
No. 7	<p><u>REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP UPDATE</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Social Services which was presented to update Members</p>	

on the work and decisions taken over the last 9 months by the Regional Partnership Board, developed under statutory guidance Part 9 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWB Act).

The Director of Social Services spoke to the report and highlighted the main areas that had occupied the Regional Partnership Board:-

- Coronavirus outbreak across partner agencies and the effect on services.
- The continuation of the Transformational Offer beyond 2021.
- The reallocation of underspend for 2019/20.
- The continuation of the Integrated Care Revenue and Capital Funds.
- Integrated Winter Plan for 2020/21.

In response to a Member's question regarding the impact on child and adult mental health services, the Director of Social Services said that it had been difficult to deliver the service in the same way as before the pandemic as there had been less face to face contact. During the first lockdown there had been an increase in mental health issues for adults and children and he felt that there would be some additional pressures on the system as a result of this. It was important to continue to deliver the service going forward and to continue to make face to face contact and by other social media means.

A Member referred to the verbal agreement for Transformational funding up to 2022 and enquired what impact next year's Welsh Assembly elections may have on this funding. The Director of Social Services said that because of the Welsh Assembly elections next May this had been a transitional period to allow any incoming or existing party to be able to make decisions whether the funding continued going forward. The Directorate had been evaluating programmes to evidence the clear benefits of each and what outcomes they could achieve for families and communities living within the Gwent region. The Director felt confident that similar funding would continue for the transitional year and this would protect some services.

On a point of clarity the Director of Social Services said that the offer in Gwent related to four areas derived from the priority areas within the Area Plan. The fifth bullet point on paragraph 2.9 related to the development of workforce planning and organisational development to underpin transformation activity and was to support the four themes.

The Chair enquired regarding the relationship between the Authority and the private sector residential settings and if there was an improved exchange of information with regard to possible Covid-19 outbreaks within those care homes. The Director of Social Services said that an excellent relationship had developed with the private sector care homes with regular feedback from commissioners, Environmental Health Officers were also in contact with private sector care homes to provide advice and guidance. Information was gathered regarding staff and residents within care homes and if there were any positive cases an enhanced testing regime was carried out within those care homes. In relation to supported living and extra care facilities there was also good information sharing, but less so with sheltered accommodation as they did not receive as much support. If an outbreak was reported in a particular facility support was requested from Public Health Wales for lab technicians from Rodney Parade to carry out testing within that facility. At the same time Environmental Health Officers would provide guidance regarding what measures needed to be put in place to protect other residents of the facility.

In response to a Member's question regarding track and trace, the Director of Social Services said that track and trace was particularly important in relation to sheltered accommodation complexes, as they would advise the Authority of an outbreak and testing would be requested from Public Health Wales for that complex to ensure there was no spread of the virus.

The Head of Adult Services said that the service was providing practical support across all its care facilities i.e. sheltered housing, care homes, domiciliary care, and supported living. The level of daily contact within sheltered housing schemes was lower than care homes, however, additional measures had been put in place. Social Workers had been ringing residents known to the service to provide

	<p>additional support in relation to wellbeing and also offer any other support services. The Officer felt it was important for Members to know that tenants in a sheltered housing scheme were provided with the same level of support as residents of other care facilities.</p> <p>The Chair commented that track and trace was essential particularly in relation to people living within non extra care settings who move about freely in the community.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1, namely that the decisions of the Regional Partnership Board be supported.</p>	

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Agenda Item 5

Executive Committee and Council only

Date signed off by the Monitoring Officer: N/A

Date signed off by the Section 151 Officer: N/A

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **10th December 2020**

Report Subject: **Integrated Care Fund (ICF) Update 2019/20**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr John Mason, Executive Member Social Services**

Report Submitted by: **Alyson Hoskins – Head of Adult Services**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
17/11/20	x	25.11.20			10/12/20	13.01.21		

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview for Members on the current allocation of funding for projects monitored by the Social Services Department and funded via the Welsh Government Integrated Care Fund (ICF) as at November 2020.
- 1.2 It also highlights the current position in relation to the announcement that there will be a further extension of the fund for a further 12 months' transition year (2021/22) and demonstrates how we are addressing the risks associated with the potential ceasing of the funding from April 2022.

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 Previous annual reports have identified the history of the Integrated Care Fund (ICF) - (formerly known as the Intermediate Care Fund) and members will be aware that ICF funding has been available to health and social care organisations since 2014/2015.
- 2.2 Whilst initially only being available for funding projects in Adult Services, in the past 2 years' eligibility for funding has been expanded and now includes funding to support key preventative projects across both Adult and Children social care.
- 2.3 The Integrated Care Fund is currently governed via the Regional Partnership Board (RPB) structures and the grant funding is administered through the ICF performance monitoring unit within Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB). The fund can be accessed by sectors that support the priorities of the Regional Partnership Board (RPB) and the overarching population needs assessment for Gwent. The grant supports the delivery of the key priorities in the areas of:
 - Older people with complex needs and long term conditions including dementia
 - People with Learning Disabilities

- Children with Complex Needs due to disability or illness
 - Carers, including young carers
- 2.4 The allocation and bidding process can be complex as there are both revenue and capital funding streams within the investment plan of ICF. The current Blaenau Gwent allocation for revenue is £950,275 (Adult Services) and £372,909 (Children Services). The allocation of capital ICF for BG is currently £544,979 - (£375,829 – Adult Services and £169,150 – Children Services).
- 2.5 Within Blaenau Gwent we have been successful and proportionate in accessing this fund since its inception. Projects we have developed have been aligned to our strategic priorities including both the 'Living Independently in Blaenau Gwent in the 21st Century' Strategy and the Reduction in Children Looked After Strategy alongside the wider cultural changes required following the implementation of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 and Welsh Government's new long term plan for health and social care 'A Healthier Wales' including alignment to the 'Gwent transformational offer'. A full summary of current ICF revenue projects in Blaenau Gwent are attached at **Appendix 1**.
- 2.6 During 2019/20 partners were notified that the current ICF funding stream would cease at the end of the 2020/21 financial year and significant concerns were raised by all partners including this Local Authority, on our ability to continue to fund the existing initiatives from within their core budget allocation.
- 2.7 However, on 24th August 2020, Welsh Government officials confirmed the current allocation of ICF (revenue of £89 million and capital of £40 million across Wales) would continue for 2021/22, although at the time of writing this update no formal allocation has been confirmed for the Gwent region, although the Gwent Regional Partnership Board has been told verbally by Welsh Government that our current Integrated Care Fund allocation should continue for a further 12 months 'transition' year in its current format until March 2022.
- 2.8 Following confirmation of this verbal decision and as part of the planning for the transition period, the Regional Partnership Board has supported the development of robust impact assessments to enable the partners to have a proactive approach to the planned closure of any initiatives.
- 2.9 There has also been concerns raised as to the additional cost pressures we would face due to the impact of potential redundancy costs across our service budgets as currently across Adult and Children Services in Blaenau Gwent, we have 24.66 whole time equivalent (wte) posts funded by this grant equating to 29 staff contracts; with 11 staff members with permanent employment/ secondments arrangements and 18 staff with fixed term contracts.
- 2.10 As a response to the situation, and to ensure that partners are able to measure the impact of the closure of these services on our day to day operations and strategic priorities, we have agreed a number of actions which

will be undertaken during the next 6 months and beyond into the transition period year 2021/22, these include:

- a) The 5 LA's in Gwent, along with ABUHB and Third Sector groups are undertaking a series of specific project evaluations. These are being led by the ICF project officers employed by the ABUHB and focus on the delivery of the project outcomes, performance information and overall value for money. Some projects are subject to a full 'deep dive' whilst others have a lighter desk top audit approach. The outcomes of these evaluations are being reported to the relevant partnership boards within the RPB governance structure.
- b) Each LA has been asked to risk rate their ICF projects and to identify the impact of the withdrawal of the funding and cessation of the services. The evaluation for Blaenau Gwent – undertaken in August 2020 has reported that 13 of the 14 projects are ranked as a high/ critical priority should they not be funded after March 2022 with 5 of the 13 being identified as service critical. These 5 services were all part of the Children Service portfolio.
- c) An indicative scoping exercise has been completed across Gwent partners in relation to the projected redundancy costs that are to be incurred should the grant cease. In addition to this we have highlighted to Welsh Government how there are restrictions within the grant conditions to enable the funding to be used to cover cost pressures for redundancies. The estimated indicative costs across Gwent which were submitted to Welsh Government were £1,353,588 (432 wte posts) for Gwent partners and a redundancy cost pressure identified of £28,232 specifically for BG staff – although this will increase with the additional year's extension of the funding and the figures will need to be revisited during Summer 2021 as part of a planned exit strategy.
- d) Internal service reviews are being undertaken for specific teams for example, we have an ongoing evidence based review of the referral pathways in our Adults IAA team and part of this review includes a focus on how some of the functions of the existing ICF posts can be incorporated into the wider functions of the team.
- e) There is a Corporate review being undertaken across the Local Authority of the current grant allocations, governance arrangements and how they link to Council priorities. The ICF funding streams are currently being evaluated as part of this review and will be subject to a future report to CLT and scrutiny committees in early 2021.

3. Options for Recommendation

3.1 The options for consideration are:

3.2 **Option 1** – to scrutinise the report and the actions currently underway to evaluate the future impact of the cessation of the ICF funded posts and services.

- 3.3 **Option 2** – to scrutinise the report and propose an alternative approach in relation to the options for mitigating the risks face by the cessation of the ICF funding from April 2022.

Option 1 is the recommended option.

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

- 4.1 Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan
The report is fulfilling our statutory functions under the Social Services and Wellbeing Act 2014 and accompanying regulations.

- 4.2 The report is also fulfilling a number of the Social Services aims within the Corporate Plan:

- To improve accessibility, provision of information and advice to enable people to support their own wellbeing;
- To intervene early to prevent problems from becoming greater;
- To work with our partners including Aneurin Bevan Health Board and neighbouring authorities to deliver integrated responsive care and support;
- To promote and facilitate new ways of delivering health and social care involving key partners and our communities.

- 4.3 A number of the areas being progressed by the ICF projects will support us to achieve two of the Wellbeing Plan objectives:

- The best start in life for everyone;
- To encourage and enable people to make healthy lifestyle choices in the place that they live, learn, work and play.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

Option 1 – The governance of the Integrated Care Fund (ICF) is overseen by the Regional Partnership Board (RPB) and a partnership approach across health and social care partners has been developed to consider the wider implications of the cessation of the partnership funding.

Option 2 – If Scrutiny were to recommend alternative approaches to those outlined in this report, then it will be appropriate to consider these alongside our neighbouring authorities and the health board to maintain a consensus in approach.

5.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

The Integrated Care Capital and Revenue Fund has historically provided significant investment enabling both Adult and Children Services to develop a number of projects across Blaenau Gwent and Gwent as a whole, and should this funding be removed at the end of the proposed transition period

we will have significant financial consequences going forward. This includes potential loss of preventative services across Children Services, in particular those services which are specifically aimed at reducing the numbers of children and young people who may otherwise require admission to our care system. These services have not only improved outcomes for young people but also have reduced the numbers of costly residential placements required.

Whilst there are no immediate impacts on the budget, there are clearly concerns in relation to the impact of the closure of the schemes should all funding cease from April 2022. The introduction of an additional 12 months' transition funding enables the department to fully evaluate the schemes based on their impact and seek alternative funding options. During this time the impact of the potential redundancy costs will also be evaluated.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

5.3 ***Legal***

The Legal department will become involved in considering and advising on any legal agreements associated with the future closure of ICF funded projects.

5.4 ***Human Resources***

Colleagues from across our Organisational Development and Finance Teams have supported in the collation of potential redundancy cost pressures during the Summer 2020 and will become involved in considering and advising on any human resource issues associated with the future closure of ICF funded projects.

6. **Supporting Evidence:**

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

Not applicable.

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

In line with our local and national priorities, our ICF projects promote seamless provision of health and social care services across Gwent.

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

The Regional Partnership Board has facilitated partnership working from across our Health, Social Care and Third sector partners in developing and evaluating ICF projects. This work has included representation from the Citizens Panel to ensure engagement and involvement in its direction.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

Both ICF and transformation grant funded projects provides the opportunity to test innovative practices and work collectively to progress integration and partnership working across the Gwent region.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

All ICF projects focus as much as possible on how Health and Social Services can work together in a more preventative way to minimise dependency on statutory provisions.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

The role the Regional Partnership Board (RPB) is to work collaboratively across boundaries to benefit citizens requiring health and social care services across Gwent. The Governance and future developments of the ICF programme are being closely scrutinised by the RPB.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

All ICF projects focus as much as possible on how Health and Social Services can integrate to provide a seamless service model for recipients of health and social care provision.

6.8 ***EqIA (screening and identifying if full impact assessment is needed)***

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

7.1 The monitoring arrangements for the Regional Partnership Board are through the Social Services Scrutiny Committee and the Executive Committee on a quarterly basis and include regular reports relating to ICF and wider Gwent grant funding streams.

Background Documents / Electronic Links

Appendix 1 – ICF funded projects in Blaenau Gwent.

APPENDIX 1 - INTEGRATED CARE FUND (ICF) INVESTMENT IN BLAENAU GWENT UPDATE

ID	Organisation		Project Ref.	Project	[Funding] Allocation	Description of investment	Other comments	Total Project WTE
1	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	OP-BGCC-COMM-01	BG Mynydd Practitioner	£32,640	This post has been utilised to develop the integration between our in house home care team and our Community Resource Team reablement service	Post is currently being advertised as previous post holder secured alternative employment.	1.00
5	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	OP-BGCC-COMM-05	Community Co-Ordinators - Blaenau Gwent	£72,270	These two posts are community connectors within in our Information Advice and Assistance (IAA) team. They also work across our GP surgeries and third sector groups to promote preventative opportunities and reduce reliance on statutory provision	Redundancy pressures associated with these posts as posts were created in 2015. During COVID response these posts have been used to support the locality hub teams. Defined as a high priority service	2.00
11	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	OP-BGCC-COMM-11	Social Value Project - Catering & Community Meals Enterprise	£47,220	This is a new post for 2020 and is leading on the review of our community meals service since it transferred to SSD in April 2020	Post holder is seconded to BG from Caerphilly.	1.00
33	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	OP-NCC-IP-03	Advocacy Access	£115,000	This funding is used across the 5 LA's and has been accessed to develop the Gwent Advocacy Strategy and commission advocates for vulnerable adults in line with Social Services and Wellbeing Act 2014	Defined as a high priority service	4.00
35	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	OP-BGCC-CARE-02	(Previously Step Up/Down Beds & Cariad Intermediate Care Beds 0 Phase 2 [Additional 4 Units])	£347,536	This funding is used to commission step up / down beds to prevent hospital admissions and reduce length of unnecessary stays in hospital. The funding is used to fund 8 beds in various settings plus the staff to support them.	This scheme has been significantly impacted by COVID as we are greatly restricted by WG guidance on temporary placements at care homes and extra care facilities. No redundancy costs as staff are seconded from substantive posts. Defined as a high priority service	4.52

48	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	LD-BGCC-TRAN-01	Transition - Development Of Integrated Working Across Adult And Children's Services In Gwent	£70,500	These posts are for 2 social workers within the Disability Team who work solely on the transition of children to adult services.	It is anticipated that there will no redundancy implications as we anticipate social work vacancies across our teams. Defined as a high priority service	2.00
52	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	LD-BGCC-COMM-01	Community Co-Ordinator	£26,520	This post is the same as the are community connectors post highlighted above but was established at a later funding allocation and specifically to work with adults who have a learning disability.	No redundancy pressures associated with this post as post holder is on secondment from Community Options team. During COVID response these posts have been used to support the locality hub teams. Defined as a high priority service	1.00
73	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	CIYC-BGCC-COMM-05	Carers Co-Ordinators - Blaenau Gwent	£49,322	This post is also a community connectors within in our Information Advice and Assistance (IAA) team but has enabled the department to strengthen support to unpaid family carers. They also work across our GP surgeries and third sector groups to promote preventative opportunities and reduce reliance on statutory provision	Redundancy pressures associated with this posts as posts was created in 2015. During COVID response these posts have been used to support the locality hub teams. Defined as a high priority service	1.00
78	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	CIYC-BGCC-SUPP-05	Carers Support - Blaenau Gwent	£52,950	These two part time posts have been developed in part ship with Carers Trust South Wales and provide a support service to unpaid family carers. This is mainly provided via the IAA and GP surgeries across BG.	During COVID these two staff members have developed an telephone and online support service in addition to their weekly GP service. Defined as a high priority service	1.60
86	Blaenau Gwent	Children Services	EIS-BGCC-CONF-01	Family Group Conferences (BG)	£77,694	Coordination of Family Group Conferences / Meetings within each of the five Local Authority areas using a regional service model to be delivered on a local level. Meetings are used when there is a risk of child coming into	Coordination of these meetings are integral to the Child Looked After Reduction strategy in BG. No current redundancy issues as these are new posts in 2020. Defined as a critical service	2.00

91	Blaenau Gwent	Children Services	EIS-BGCC-MED-01	Mediation Support (BG)	£34,847	This funding delivers a Young Person's Mediation Service aimed at ages 14 years and above. The model works with young people and their families where conflict has led to the young person either leaving or being asked to leave their home. The service provides young people with the opportunity to talk about their worries and concerns and assist them to explore available options and retain control over their lives	As above	1.00
96	Blaenau Gwent	Children Services	EIS-BGCC-SGO-01	Special Guardianship Order Support (BG)	£135,521	This funding delivers a Gwent wide 'offer' of support to Special Guardians to both assist them in their caring role but also to assist the Courts in having a viable alternative to adoption and long term fostering. A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) provides a legally secure placement for a child until they reach the age of eighteen years. It can be a positive alternative to adoption because it retains the child's sense of identity and belonging.	As above	3.00
101	Blaenau Gwent	Children Services	EIS-BGCC-EEOC-01	Enhanced Edge Of Care (BG)	£124,847	This funding enhances our Local Authorities Edge of Care Team (known as Supporting Change Team in Blaenau Gwent) with the additional resources of a dedicated psychological support worker, educational support worker and a children's community connector.	As above	3.00
144	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	DEM-LA-LW-06	Early Intervention Dementia Reablement Services	£136,317	This funding has been provided to increase our current reablement team to enable the Community Resource Team to provide bespoke support for people with dementia and memory loss	These posts are provided by colleagues in ABUHB. Defined as a high priority service	

Capital ICF Investment

	Blaenau Gwent	Adults Services	ICF-GWE-29	Augusta House respite expansion	£375,829	This funding has been provided to expand our current accommodation offer at Augusta House to include additional independent accommodation units		
	Blaenau Gwent	Children Services	ICF GWE 30/ ICF DCP GWE 53	Integrated Family Resource Centre (Beaufort Road) / Children’s Resource Centre Re-design	£130,475 £38,675	Redesign of office accommodation to meet the needs of you people including development of bespoke facilities to promote the independence of young people		

Agenda Item 6

Executive Committee and Council only

Date signed off by the Monitoring Officer:

Date signed off by the Section 151 Officer:

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**
Date of meeting: **10th December 2020**
Report Subject: **National Adoption Service Annual Report 2019/20**
Portfolio Holder: **Cllr John Mason, Executive Member of Social Services**
Report Submitted by: **Damien McCann, Corporate Director of Social Services**

Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
12.11.20	19.11.20	25.11.20			10.12.20	13.01.20		

1. **Purpose of the Report**

To report on the performance of the South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) and the National Adoption Service (NAS) for 2019/20.

2. **Scope and Background**

This report is required in line with the Regulations as set out in The Local Authority Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2005.

2.1.1 The regional performance report under **Appendix 1** and the National performance report under **Appendix 2** have been produced by the National Adoption Service. Both reports focus on key areas which include:

- Children placed and waiting for adoption;
- Demand for adoptive placements and adopter recruitment;
- Life journey materials; and
- Adoption Support.

2.1.2 The National Adoption Service (NAS) was launched in November 2014 with a remit of expectations to:

- Eradicate drift for children in care;
- Eliminate waiting lists for training and assessment of adopters;
- Improve the matching process for children;
- Allay adoption breakdowns by improving adoption support;
- Streamline the process to ensure better linking for children;
- Provide a wide choice of placements
- Ensuring consistent delivery of adoption services across Wales.

2.1.3 National Adoption Service

There is a small central team headed by the Director of Operations. The national team provides national direction, development and coordination to all the regions.

The regions include:

- South East Wales Adoption Team **(SEWAS)** (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Torfaen, Newport, Monmouthshire)
- Western Bay **(WB)** (Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot, Swansea).
- Vale, Valley's Cardiff **(VVC)** (Cardiff, Vale, Merthyr Tydfil, RCT, Vale of Glamorgan).
- North Wales **(NW)** (Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd)
- Mid and West Wales **(MWW)** (Carmarthen, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Powys).

2.1.4 Blaenau Gwent host the South East Wales Adoption Service region.

Every region is responsible for:

- Placing children for adoption (Local Authority);
- Recruitment and assessment of adopters;
- Offering counselling to birth parents;
- Offering advice to adopted adults;
- Providing post adoption support;
- Matching children with adopters;
- Creating links with voluntary adoption agencies, health and education

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 **Option 1** - Provide comment or any amendment to, or inclusion of, information on the content of the report to assist executive in its function.

3.2 **Option 2** - Accept the information as reported

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

4.1 The work of the South East Wales Adoption Service supports the following priorities for social services under the corporate plan:

- To intervene early to prevent problems from becoming greater;
- To work with our partners including Aneurin Bevan University Health Board and neighbouring authorities to deliver integrated responsive care and support;
- To promote and facilitate new ways of delivering health and social care involving key partners and our communities

SEWAS also supports the Safe Reduction of Looked After Children Strategy 2017-2020.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 *Impact on Budget*

5.1.2 SEWAS is a collaborative arrangement funded by the 5 local authorities within this region

5.1.3 The Management Committee (required under regulation) is responsible for ensuring arrangements are in place to deliver the regional service and this includes financial arrangements.

5.1.4 There have been no concerns regarding the budget for this reporting year. The budget has been managed effectively resulting in no overspend at the end of the financial year 19/20.

5.2 *Risk*

5.2.1 **Shortage of adopters**

The risk implication for this reporting period mirrors that of previous years in respect of the shortage of adopters available to meet the needs of the children referred to the service. Enquiries and new assessments commencing have decreased, although, it should be noted that recent investment in a marketing and recruitment officer and a new standalone website will not have impacted on the numbers for this reporting year.

5.2.2 **Mitigation**

To improve performance in this area SEWAS will continue to invest in recruitment. SEWAS now have a Marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) who is raising the profile of SEWAS using social media platforms. Investment in a marketing and recruitment officer and standalone website. We know that our core offer is good and we are now in a position to promote the service in a way that is more accessible to the general public. This core offer includes:

- Direct work pre and post approval which prepares children and adopters for placement;
- Additional post approval adoption training before placement using therapeutic models;
- Adoption support post order for adopters, children and birth parents
- Assessment being completed in a timely manner;
- Young person's support group
- Peer Support Groups using the TESSA (Therapeutic Education Support Service in Adoption) model
- Family and Friends training and support
- Dad's group
- In house psychology provision for adopter and children

- Advertising our core offer including our psychology service input which is a 'big sell'.
- 5.3 *Legal*
This report is required in line with the Regulations as set out in The Local Authority Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Joint Adoption Arrangements) (Wales) Directions 2005
- 5.4 *Human Resources*
No Issues
6. **Supporting Evidence**
- 6.1 *Performance Information and Data*
- 6.1.1 **National Adoption Service Annual Report 19/20**
- The full report can be found under **Appendix 2**. The Highlights will be captured here.
- 6.1.2 **ADOPTERS – TRENDS IN APPROVALS, ENQUIRIES AND NEW ASSESSMENTS (National)**
- Adopter approvals increased by 18% overall, new enquiries by a further 5% and there was also a small increase of 3% in adopter assessments commencing.
- Nearly half of adopters were approved within 6 months of their application; on average it takes 6.5 months for an adopter to be approved which is positive and in line with guidance.
- The number of approved adopters waiting for a match at the end of the year increased
- 6.1.3 **ADOPTERS – TRENDS IN APPROVALS, ENQUIRIES AND NEW ASSESSMENTS (SEWAS)**
- The full report can be found under **Appendix 1** The highlights will be captured here.
- Enquiries and new assessments commenced have begun to reduce, although, the recent investment in marketing and a new website will not yet have had a significant impact.
- Timeframes for approvals increased marginally but the region continues to perform well against recommended timeframes including 58% of approvals being within the 6 months benchmark for application to approval.
- OVERALL IMPACT ON PLACING CHILDREN IN 19/20 (National)**
- 6.1.4 309 children were placed, a similar number to the last three years.

270 adoption orders were granted for children already placed.

The number of children waiting at the end of the year (31.03.20) reduced to 270. This included a further 68 children with a 'firm link' which was likely to be agreed plus 22 children who were likely to have their status changed back to long term 'looked after'.

Average timescales for children being placed remained relatively static at 10.1 months, albeit a little above the benchmark of 8 months as outlined in guidance.

Referrals dropped by 21% from 2018/19 – all regions experienced reduction.

OVERALL IMPACT ON PLACING CHILDREN IN 19/20 (SEWAS)

6.1.5 SEWAS place 67 children in this reporting year

SEWAS increased the proportion of children placed within the region by 4% to 63%, with a further 10% placed elsewhere in Wales in both LA and Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

36% of children placed were sibling groups of two.

SEWAS improved the proportion of children placed within the 6 months of the placement order to 37%.

Linked to this SEWAS also improved the average time taken for a child to be placed once the placement order had been granted by almost a month, to 9.2 months.

Children – waiting

6.1.6 SEWAS children subject to a placement order but not yet matched stood at 58 as of 31.03.20. This figure does not include children with possible links

Life Journey Work (LJW)

6.1.7

SEWAS have struggled to improve on the performance measure for Life Journey work again this as indicated in the appendix 2 graph.

SEWAS appointed a LJW coordinator in September 2019. The new LJW model 'My story so far' was signed off by SEWAS management committee in January 2020 with a rolling programme to deliver training workshops to social workers, team manager and IRO's. Due to Covid the programme switched to remote platform training and reach a bigger audience than would have done pre lockdown. This didn't impact on the performance measure for this reporting year, however, the figures for quarter 1 2020

look impressive (95% completed for LJW made available at matching meeting)

OVERVIEW OF ADOPTION SUPPORT PROVISION DURING 2019/20 (National)

6.1.8

The number of children whose plan included support from the time of placement remained relatively stable during 2019/20 at around 35% of children placed.

Similarly, there was also an increase in the number assessments for adoption support carried out. These are for families / children who are not in receipt of ongoing support who develop support needs.

More than two thirds of new assessments result in therapeutic or practical support being provided.

The number of active letterbox arrangements reached 3,819, an increase from last year

Implementation of the TESSA programme

6.1.9

The Therapeutic, Education and Support Services in Adoption (TESSA) programme is a Wales wide initiative that aims to empower adoptive parents, who are raising traumatised children, by giving them early access to a clinical psychologist as well as peer support.

By the end of March 2020 the service had received 42 referrals.

Young Person Information and Support Service (Connected)

During 2019/20 the new 'Connected' service worked with 84 children and young people, alongside planning to expand into all parts of Wales in partnership with the NAS regions. Adoption UK are our strategic partner for this initiative.

New Best Practice Approaches

6.1.10

Transitions and early placement support
Contact arrangements for adopted children;
Work with birth parents; and
An updated good practice framework and approach to adoption support assessment, planning and review.

OVERVIEW OF ADOPTION SUPPORT PROVISION DURING 2019/20 (SEWAS) and update on Welsh Government investment for adoptions support

6.1.11

SEWAS has for a number of years provided higher levels of support due to its service provision which includes understanding the child days, supporting early placement and the access to psychology service. This

continued in 2019/20 resulting in support being provided to 85% of children placed, significantly more than in most regions.

SEWAS have implemented the TESSA programme and the Young Person advice service, although, those programmes are now being delivered remotely. We have also made significant contribution to the best practice guides alongside increasing Psychology support and direct work including understanding the child days. 14 additional Social workers in the service have received therapeutic training in DDP level 2 (Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy and Theraplay) and 1 team manager in DDP level 1. Two social workers attended Theraplay training.

A marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) was appointed to in November 2019 (18.5 hrs). His focus has been building up our presence on social media, developing the SEWAS website, analysing data and building links with other agencies. He has made strong links with the Communications Teams across our 5 Local Authorities areas, other regional adoption services.

The SEWAS website has been launched and is now up and running. In order to improve the number of initial enquires, The MRO has analysed data on adopters in order to understand trends (age, gender, job role and location of adopters). This will enable SEWAS to better target our advertising as 60% of adopters are through online advertising.

SEWAS provided support for 27 birth parent and a further 7 are being supported in writing letters box correspondence. There are currently over 600 letterbox arrangements in place for our region.

The process of how birth parents receive support /information at the point their child is referred to SEWAS has been reviewed including feedback from birth parents themselves.

6.2 *Expected outcome for the public*

6.3 *Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)*

SEWAS consults with all adopters following their attendance at training, adoption panel for approval and when they are matched with children.

The Adoption Support Team in SEWAS facilitates a number of support groups including; birth parent support, adopter support, therapeutic parenting support, and grandparent/ family and friend of adopters.

A quarterly newsletter is distributed to all adopters which advises them on where they can access support and training.

6.4 *Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)*

SEWAS uses the performance information to plan for the longer term and changing the way in which services are delivered. The region is also working to a NAS strategic long term plan

6.5 *Preventative focus*

The focus is on avoiding drift for children in care by providing adoption placements that meet the needs of children who are referred to the service. The performance measures highlight that children are now being placed for adoption in a timelier manner which supports local authority looked after children reduction plans. A good standard of adoption support is also essential to avoid adoption breakdown and prevent children coming back into care.

6.6 *Collaboration / partnership working*

The regions continue to work collaboratively by sharing information and good practice. There are a number of work streams in process to improve collaboration with partner agencies including improving CAMHS services to adopted children and working with education so they have a better understanding of the issues for adopted children.

6.7 *Integration (across service areas)*

SEWAS continues to form relationships with other department in the councils in the region to improve outcomes for children who are placed for adoption. An example of this is working with communication teams to promote adoption within the region to attract adopters. We also provide training for local authority social workers on a quarterly basis

6.8 *EqlA (screening and identifying if full impact assessment is needed.*

The work of the SEWAS is a key part of the Blaenau Gwent safe children looked after reduction strategy. The strategy aims to reduce the inequalities children would face if they remained in the looked after system.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

7.1 The performance of the National Adoption Service/ Regions is monitored by a National Governance Board and regional Management Committee.

SEWAS have a business plan which is reported on Quarterly to the Children's management team.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

Appendix 1 – South East Wales Performance Report – 2019/20

Appendix 2 – National Adoption Service Annual Report – 2019/20

South East Wales Performance Report - 2019/20

The end year performance report for 2019/20 includes data on:

- Children placed and waiting;
- Adopter recruitment;
- Meeting placement need; and
- Adoption support including Life Journey work.

Highlights

Children placed and matched	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is improvement in the time taken to place children; with a further increase in the number of children placed within 6 months of the PO being granted and in the average time taken to place children. Numbers of children placed and matched continues to decrease.
Adopter assessments and approvals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Timeframes for approvals increased marginally but the region continues to perform well against recommended timeframes including 58% of approvals being within the 6 month benchmark for application to approval. 36 adoptive families were approved the lowest number for the region since this data began to be collected. Enquiries and new assessments commenced have begun to reduce albeit that recent investment in marketing and a new website will not yet have had a significant impact.
Children waiting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The number of children waiting at year end reduced by 6% (n4) and stood at 58. This reduction included 12 children whose placement orders were revoked a smaller number than the previous year.
Adoption support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significantly more children in SEWAS are supported from the point of placement, 85% in 2019/20. This is likely to impact positively on the levels of new requests for post approval support at a later stage which are falling.
Life Journey materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SEWAS is currently not able to provide data on life journey work available at matching. Availability by the 2nd adoption review is maintained at 56% albeit short of the 100% benchmark.
Birth parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A similar number of birth parents were supported in a context of fewer referrals.

CORE DATA

2019/20 saw a significant reduction in children being referred to adoption services across Wales albeit not as large as that seen in 2015/16 which was after two significant High Court judgements.

For SEWAS in 2019/20

- Referrals fell to 138 a 27% reduction from 2018/19 and a 32% drop from the 204 referrals received in 2016/17 when this data started to be collected. All NAS regions experienced a reduction with SEWAS being the 2nd highest;
- There were 11 fewer 'should be placed' decisions a fall of 13% on the previous year with SEWAS being one the three regions that experienced a reduction; and
- Placement orders fell only slightly by 1 to 73 or 1% - all regions except for Mid & West Wales experienced a reduction.

The reasons for this are likely to be varied and will reflect the work being done by local authorities with the Welsh Government to reduce levels of 'looked after' children in Wales including the positive impact of 'Edge of Care' and 'Reflect' services. ***It is likely that these factors apply in SEWAS; the region may however want to consider what, specifically for them, has influenced this.***

This provides an opportunity to focus on further reducing the level of children waiting as will the lower levels of referrals and should be placed decisions in 2019/20 which may lead to a further reduction in placement orders during 2020/21.

It remains the case that circa one fifth¹ of all children leaving the looked after system in Wales do this through adoption as the best permanence option for individual children. Regional level data on this is not currently available.

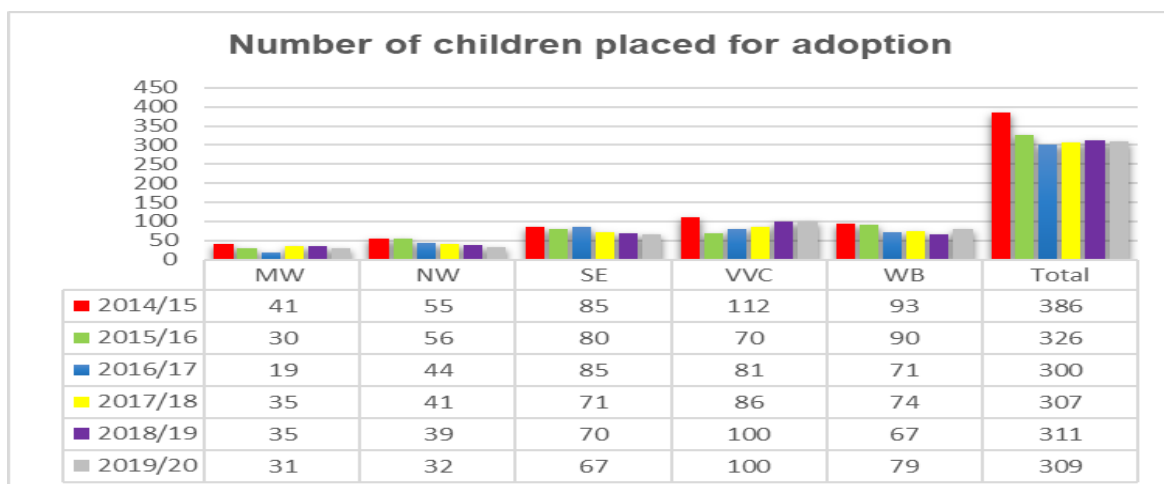
CHILDREN

Children - placed and matched

At 67, the number of children placed for adoption by SEWAS fell by just 3 albeit that this is in the context of a small year on year reduction since 2014/15. The overall reduction since 2014/15 and 2016/17, the years of the previous higher levels, is just over 20%.

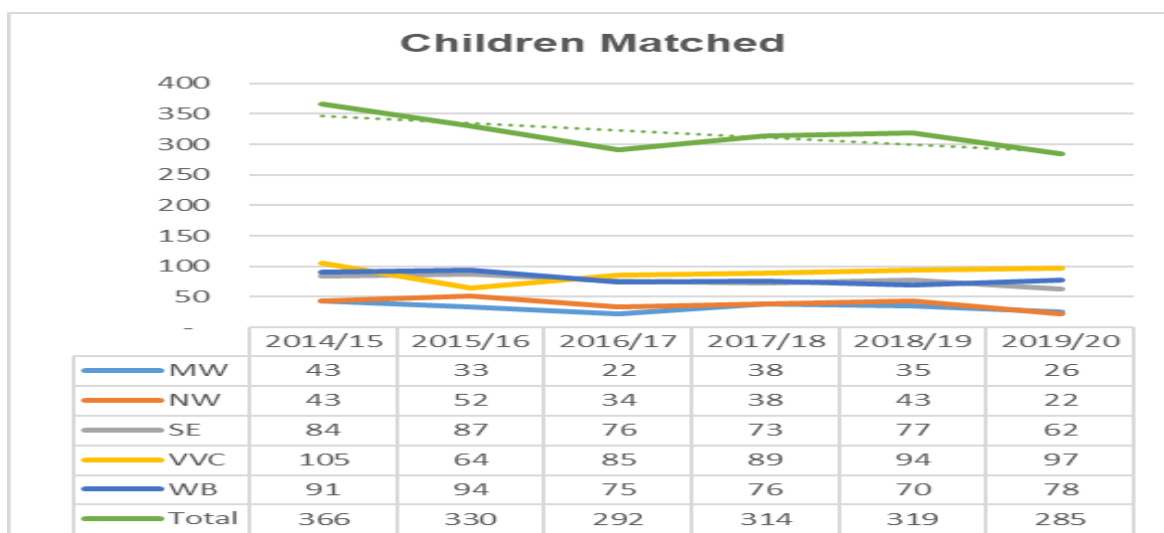
SEWAS increased the proportion of children placed within the region by 4% to 63%, with a further 10% placed elsewhere in Wales in both LA and VAA placements and an increased 27% outside of Wales. This compares to 59%, 23% and 19% respectively last year. 36% of children placed (n24) were sibling groups of two.

¹ Welsh Government Statistical release Children looked after by local authorities, 2018/19. Children leaving care by reason of adoption: 18% 2018/19



South East Wales		67					
Location:	Total Number	Via LA	Via VAA	Single	Sibling Group of 2	Sibling Group of 3	Sibling Group of 4+
Wales - within own region	42	42	0	30	12	0	0
Wales - outside own region	7	4	3	3	4	0	0
England	14	4	10	10	4	0	0
Scotland	4	2	2	0	4	0	0
Northern Ireland							
Other							
Total	67	52	15	43	24	0	0
<i>Number of Families</i>	55			43	12	0	0

The region also saw a 20% reduction in children matched, one of three regions to see this. There were 62 matches made which continues a gradual year on year reduction over the last 6 years; overall there has been a 29% reduction in children matched since the higher level of 87 in 2016/17.

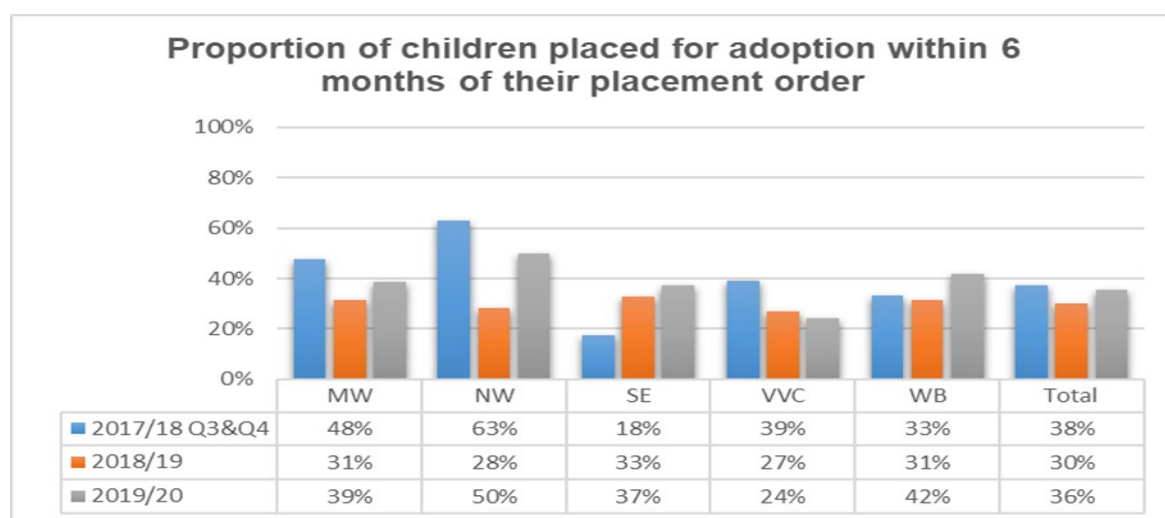


This reduction is likely to lead to a corresponding reduction in placements next year although it is not yet impacting significantly on the level of children waiting.

Children – timeframes

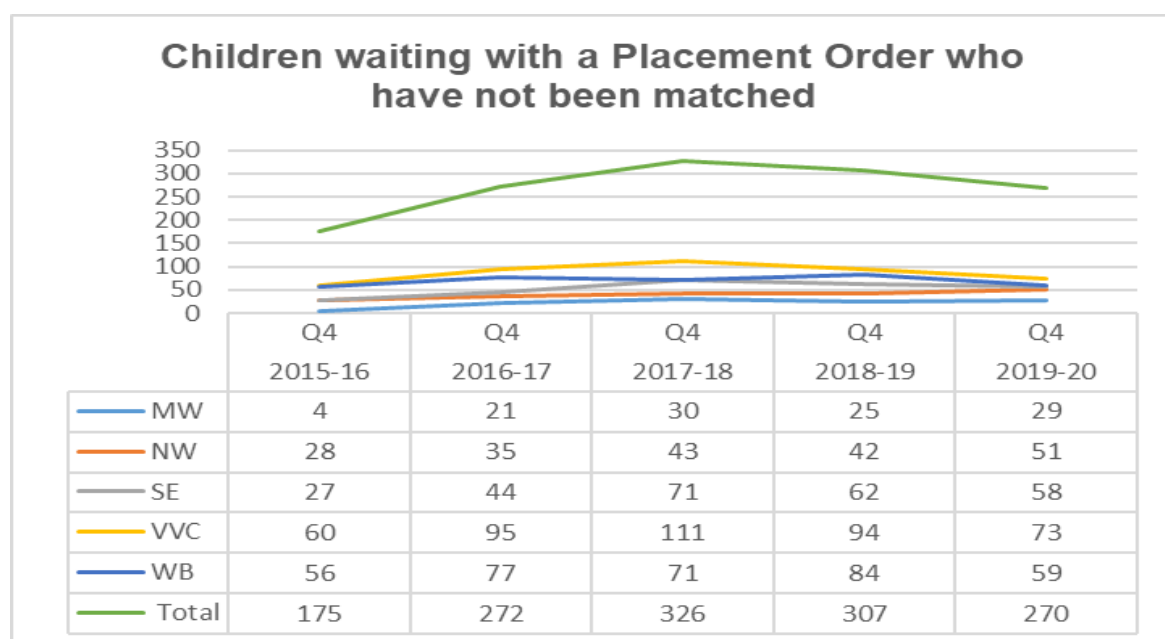
SEWAS improved the proportion of children placed within the 6 months of the placement order to 37%, one of 4 regions that did this. Overall 35% of children across Wales were placed within 6 months of their placement order which is the benchmark.

Linked to this SEWAS also improved the average time taken for a child to be placed once the placement order had been granted by almost a month, to 9.2 months, being the only region to achieve a significant reduction in this.



Children - waiting

The number of SEWAS children subject to a placement order but not yet matched stood at 58 on 31.03.20 a reduction of 6% (n4) from end of last year.



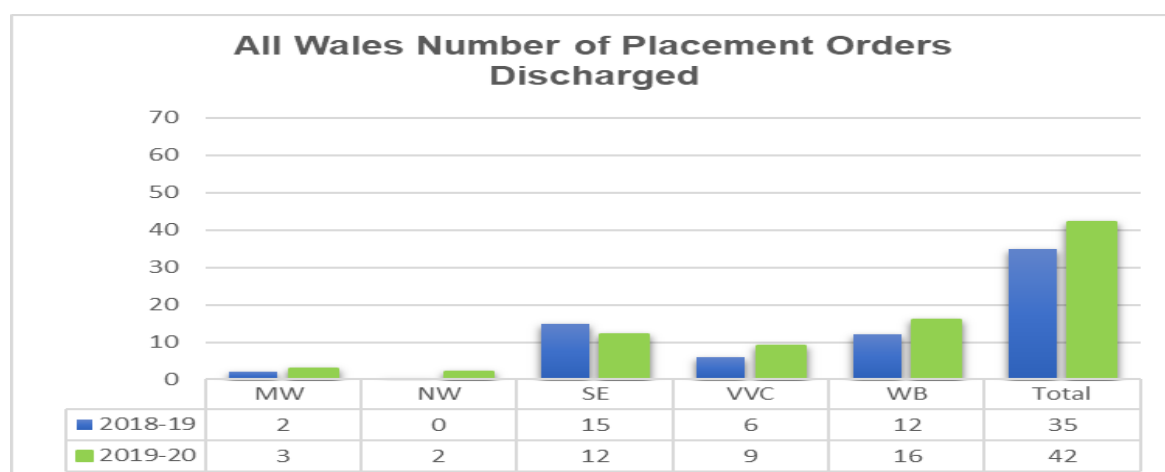
For SEWAS this number includes

- 18 children with a firm 'link' which is likely to be agreed and
- 3 children who are likely to have their status changed back to long term 'looked after' and an application for their placement order to be discharged.

If these children are excluded the overall adjusted number of children for whom SEWAS was actively family finding at year end reduces to 37.

For strategic planning purposes the region needs to aim to be able to place all children with a placement order so that no placement orders are discharged. In order to understand this better NAS has begun to monitor placement order discharges due to the fact that this is the less positive feature underpinning the reduction in the level of children waiting.

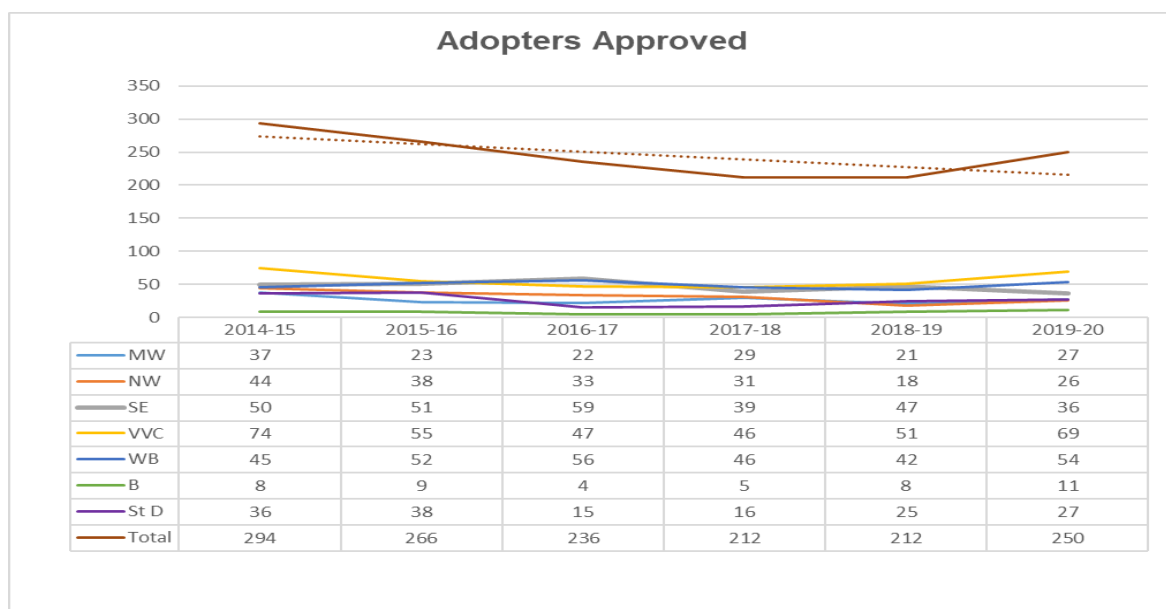
The number of placement order discharges reduced by three to 12 for SEWAS in 2019/20. SEWAS reports that short court ordered searching timeframes as well as placement availability are behind this; features which are shared in some other parts of Wales. Further Wales-wide analysis of this will be undertaken in 2020/21.



ADOPTERS

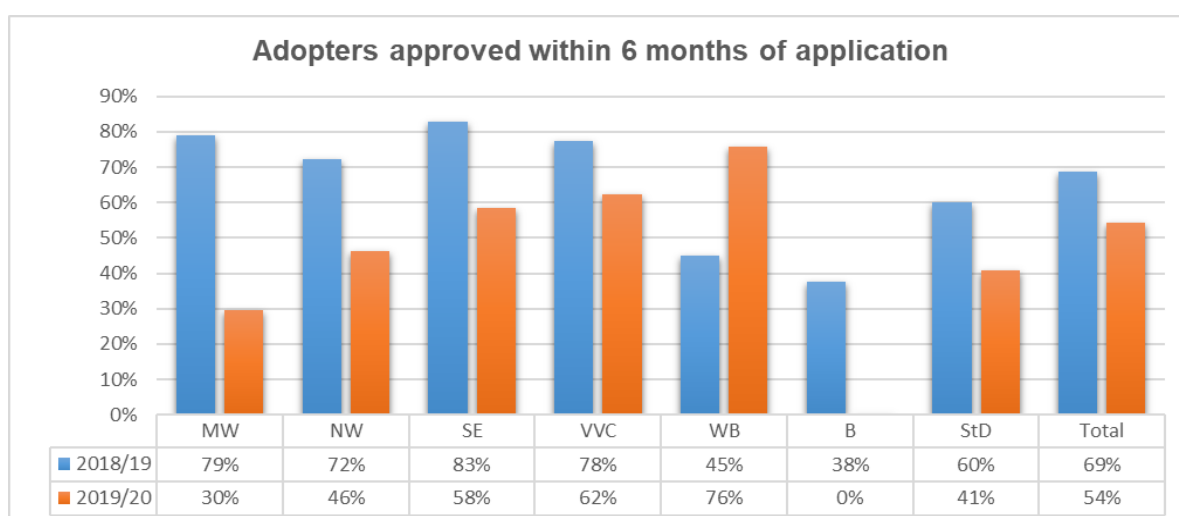
Adopters - approved and waiting

SEWAS approved 36 adopters during 2019/20, a decrease of 19% on last year and the only region to experience this; other regions / agencies experienced increases ranging from 8% to 44%.

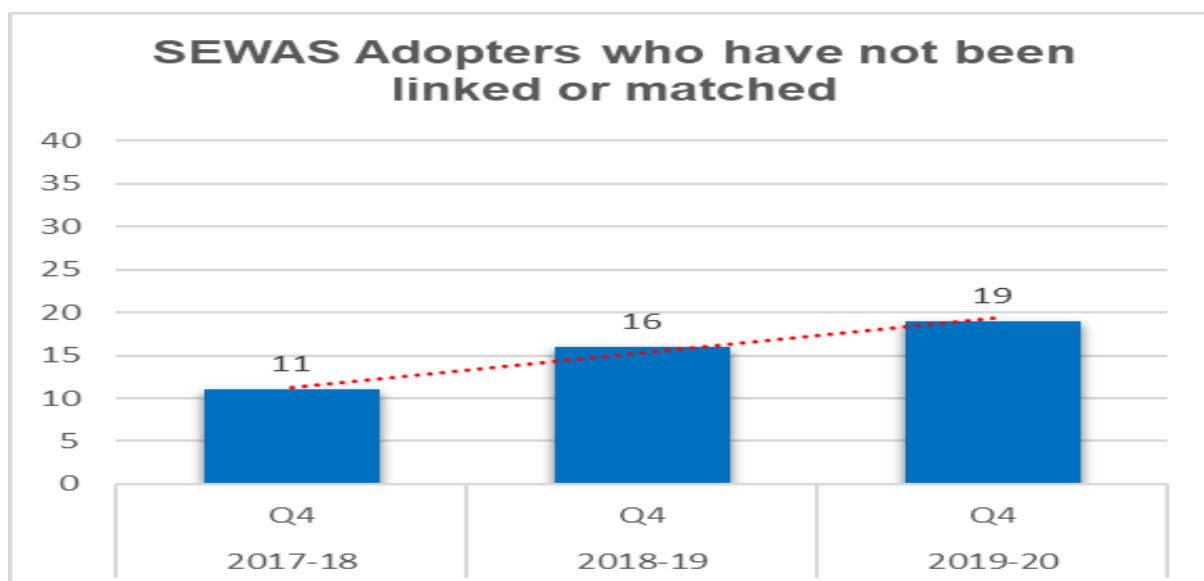


In terms of timeframes, the overall Wales average from the initial adopter enquiry to approval increased by just over a month to 10.4 months. SEWAS saw an increase of just over a month to 8.7 months but this remains near the guideline timeframe of 8 months.

A better measure of agency performance is the average from formal application to approval for which there is a benchmark of 6 months. Although seeing a small increase SEWAS continued to meet this benchmark with approvals taking on average 6 months. 58% of SEWAS adopters were approved within 6 months of the application.



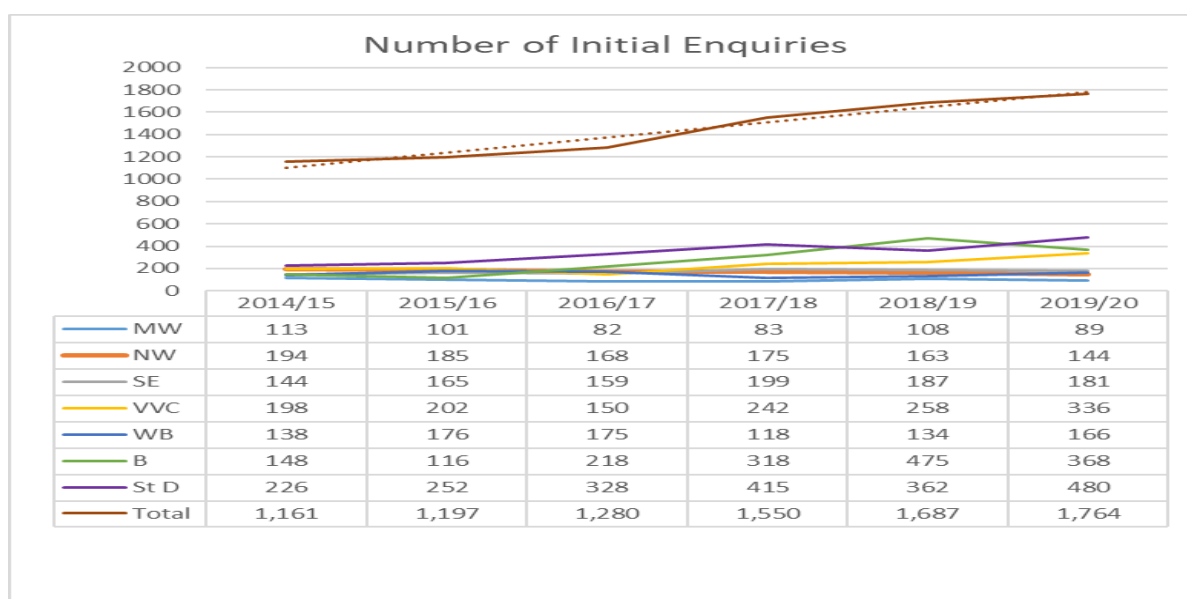
96 approved adopters waiting across Wales who had not yet been linked or matched at 31.03.20, an increase of 51 compared to 31.03.19. SEWAS saw an increase of 3 to 19.



Adopters – enquiries and new assessments

Levels of enquiries and assessments started are indicative of whether continued increases in approvals is likely into the future.

Generally across Wales the level of initial enquiries continues to increase showing a further rise of 4% during 2019/20. SEWAS saw a small decrease on 2018/19 but this is the second year with a reduction which totals 9% since the previous high of 199 enquiries in 2017/18.

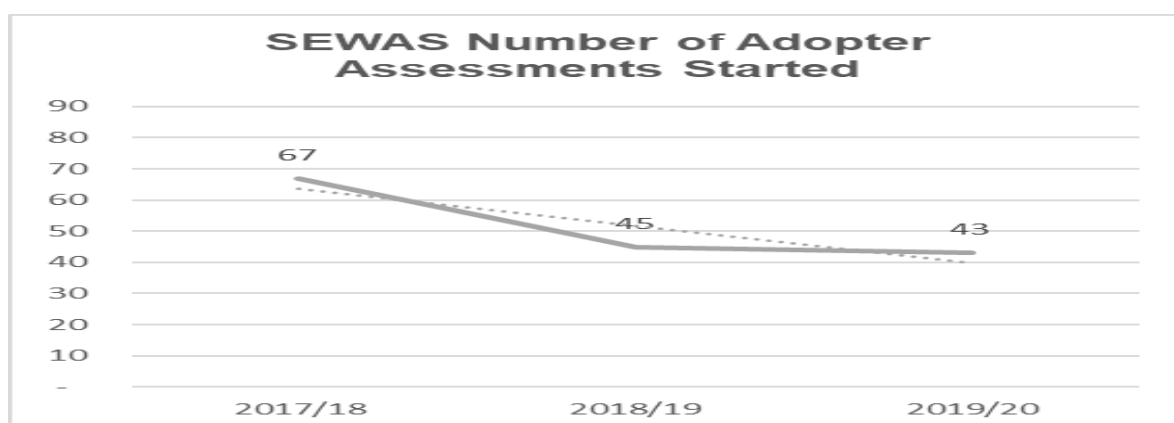


As outlined in the NAS Recruitment Strategy bigger increases of circa 33% are needed to meet need. Alternatively smaller increases combined with increased

conversion rates could facilitate increased approvals. Conversion in SEWAS was circa 12% during 2019/20 compared to 33% in the region with the highest conversion rate.

The goals provided by the region for the 'incremental model' aim to increase recruitment in order to reduce children waiting. For the 2019/20 the goal was 43. For 2020/21 the region aims to approve 72 adopters to meet calculated need.

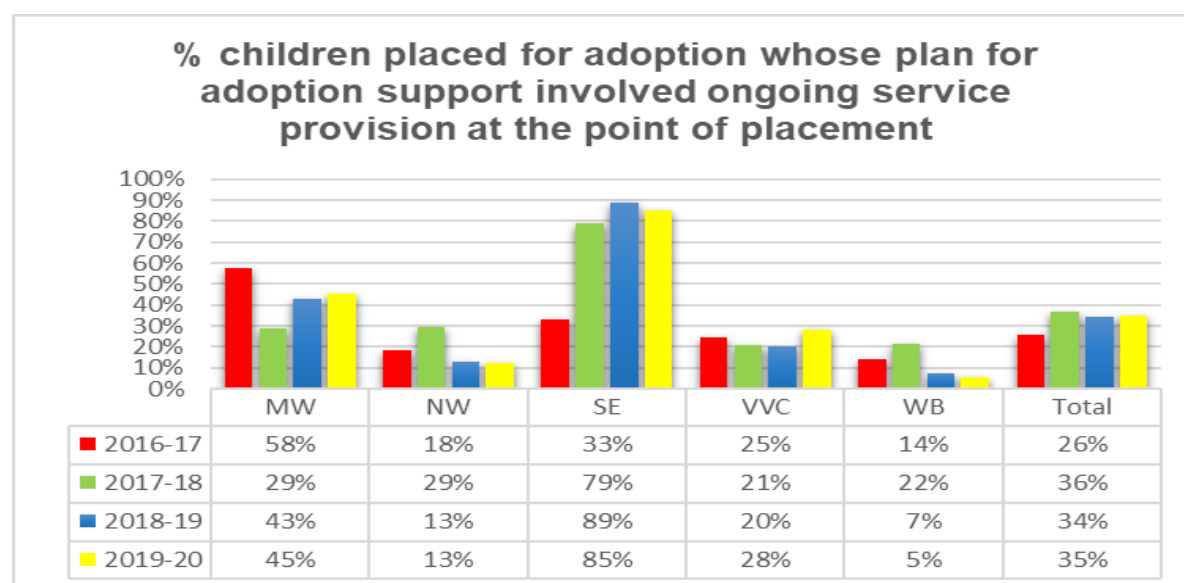
Across Wales, the number of assessments started increased slightly by 3% (n8) during 2019/20. SEWAS saw a marginal reduction from 2018/19 (n2) but this continues a lower level of assessments started, circa one third lower, compared to 2017/18 when this data began to be analysed.



In the last year the region has used investment to recruit a marketing officer and to launch a new website alongside numerous initiatives to attract interest. Now these are in place, the region will wish to capitalise on these to increase interest and applications to achieve desired numbers. ***The region may wish to consider whether there is other action possible or needed in the short term while these changes take effect.***

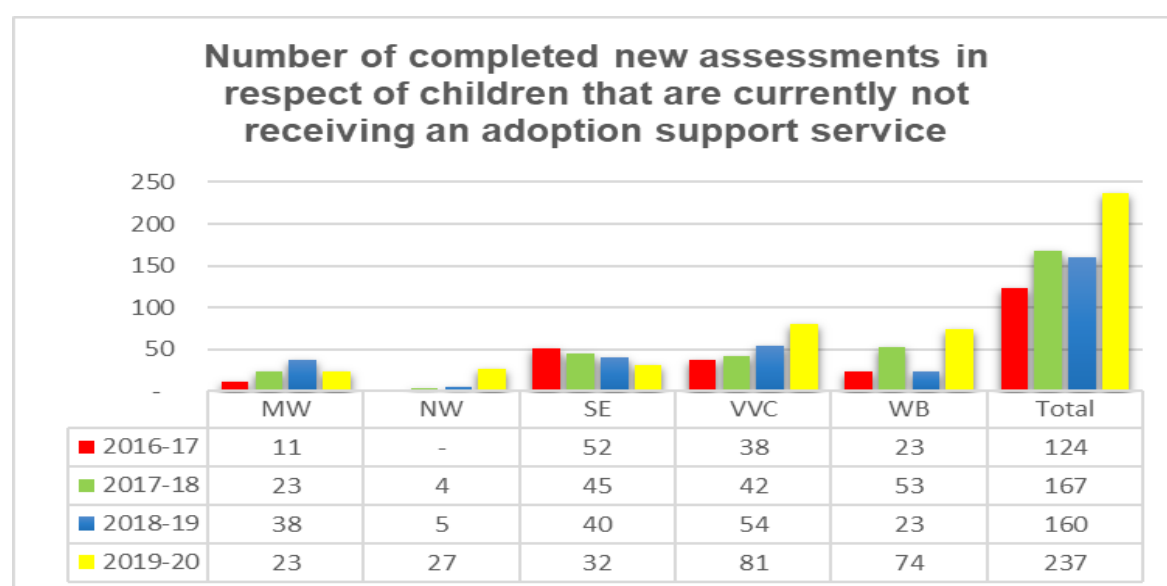
ADOPTION SUPPORT

Across Wales, the number of children whose plan included support from the time of placement remained relatively stable during 2019/20 comprising circa 35% of children placed. This is a fairly low percentage but an increase from the estimates of circa 25% in pre NAS research.



However, SEWAS has for a number of years provided higher levels of support due to its service configuration and the access to psychology service. This continued in 2019/20 resulting in support being provided to 85% of children placed, significantly more than in most regions.

Unlike other regions, and likely as a consequence, SEWAS saw a decrease in the number of new assessments for adoption support carried out. These are for families / children who are not in receipt of ongoing support who develop support needs. This reduced to 32 from 40.

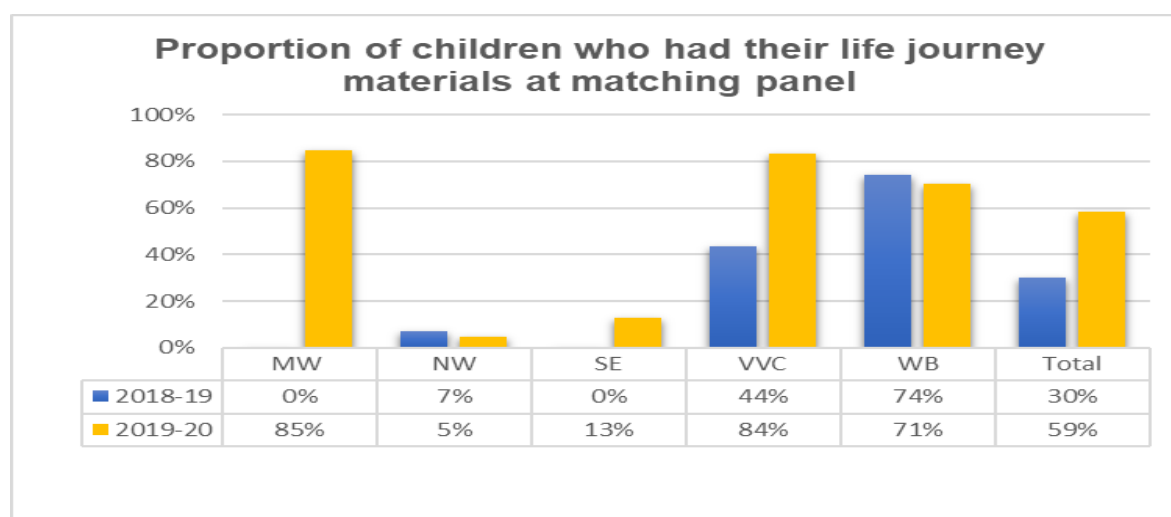


In common with other regions, a high level of new assessments undertaken by SEWAS result in therapeutic or practical support being provided.

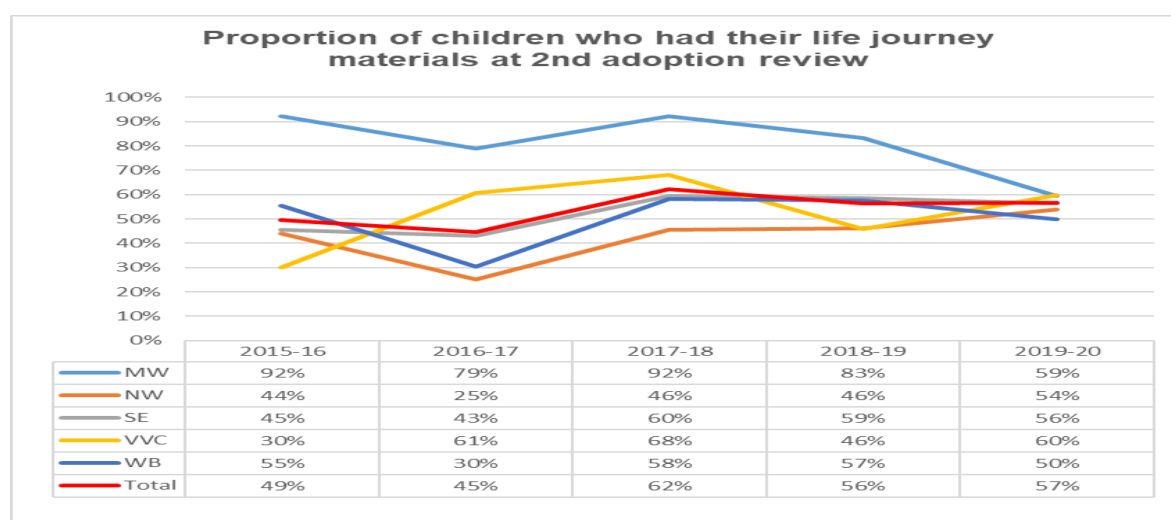
Requests from birth siblings for an assessment were at a similar level to last year (n8). Requests for support access to birth records stayed at a similar level (n53) while requests for intermediary services fell (n5). There has been a year on year reduction in the latter.

LIFE JOURNEY MATERIALS

Levels of materials in place at matching panel across Wales has improved significantly overall to 59%. SEWAS is one of two regions are still developing reporting capability for this measure; performance is low at 13% compared to a range of 71% to 85% in the other three regions which is in sight of the 100% benchmark.

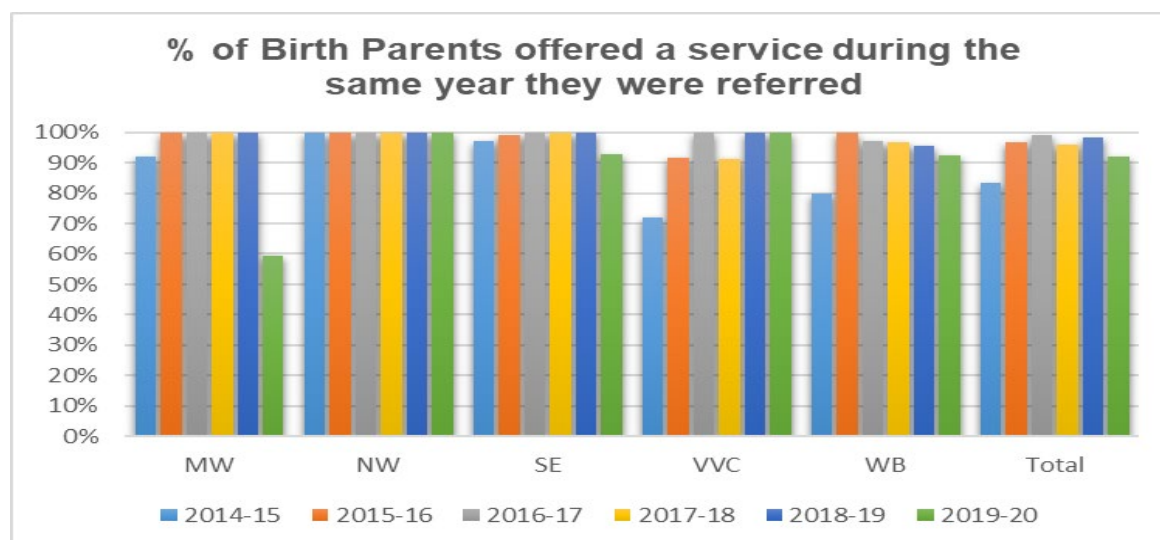


There has been no further improvement in the level of life journey materials in place for children at the second adoption review. Overall across Wales this was 57% over the year and on a par with 2018/19 albeit remaining significantly short of the 100% benchmark. This reduced in SEWAS for a second year by 3% to 56%,.



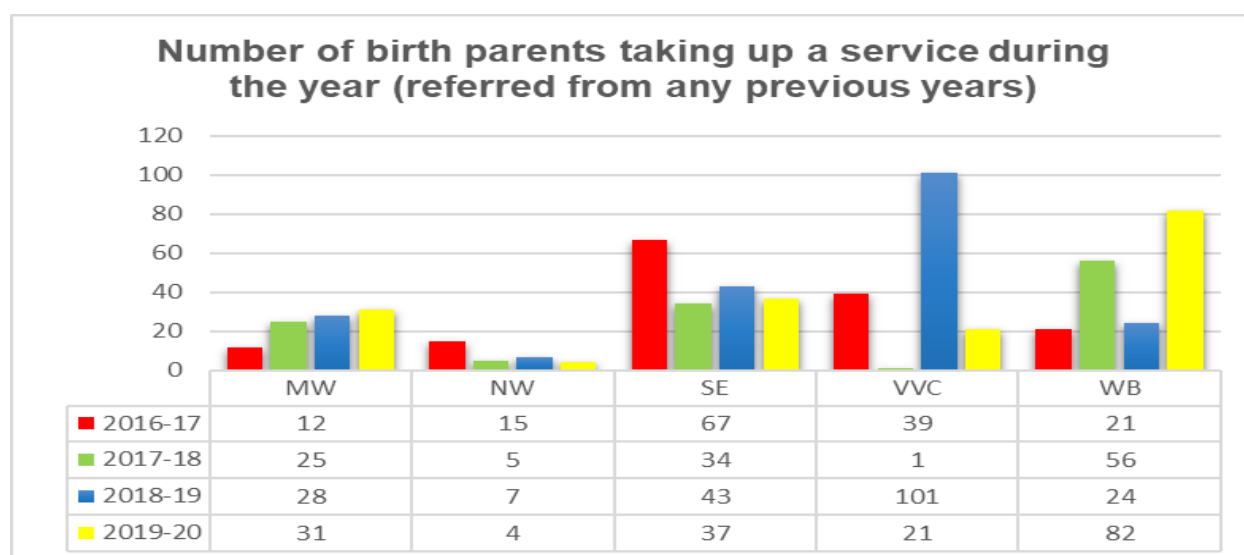
BIRTH PARENTS

Overall across Wales birth parents are offered a service in a timely way. There was a small reduction in the proportion offered a service by SEWAS to 93% in a context of a reduction in referrals from 222 to 179.



Take up in the year offered remains low across Wales although at 25% it was the highest in 2019/20 since NAS was established. Likewise 16% (n30) of birth parents offered a service by SEWAS took it up in the same year, the highest level to date which compares to a range between 7% and 63% in other regions.

There continue to be a significant number of birth parents who seek services at the time that works for them rather than within the year of referral. The pattern in SEWAS mirrors this.



Overall SEWAS offered a service to just under 70 birth parents during 2019/20 a similar level to last year.

National Adoption Service Central Team 10.07.20

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Gwasanaeth
Mabwysiadu
Cenedlaethol

National
Adoption
Service

**Achieving More Together /
Cyflawni Mwy Gyda'n Gilydd**

ANNUAL REPORT 2019-20





FOREWORD

This report focuses on progress, improvements, and challenges for the National Adoption Service (NAS) in 2019/20. It is being published as we emerge from the unprecedented Coronavirus pandemic which has significantly affected lives and society since the end of March 2020.

This report focuses on the year up to March 2020; we felt it important to continue with this publication while acknowledging that our next public reports will undoubtedly comment on the impact of the pandemic. This report highlights:

- the crucial importance of dynamic collaboration between Local Government, Voluntary Adoption Agencies, and the NAS Central Team to meet and deliver excellent adoption services in Wales;
- that listening and engagement with adopters, prospective adopters, children and young people continues to influence and shape the priorities for adoption services in Wales;
- the intelligent use and scrutiny of data, research evidence, and the skills and experience of the workforce continues to influence adoption service priorities; and
- the important contribution of all organisations in the NAS collaborative, statutory and voluntary adoption services working together effectively in making a positive difference to the long term futures of children.

Placing children, recruitment of adopters, continued improvement of adoption support services, have all been important activities during 2019/20. The Adoption UK Barometer of adoption services across the UK highlighted significant progress and satisfaction with the development of adoption services in Wales.

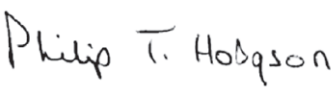
The support and financial investment by the Welsh Government during 2019/20 has been welcomed by adopters and the workforce and is making a positive difference.

We thank adopters, children & young people for influencing how services are improved and delivered in Wales. Equally, we thank all staff in the National Adoption Service wales wide for their hard work and dedication.

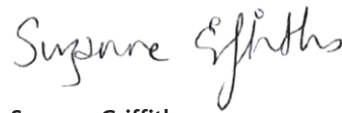



Councillor Alan Lockyer
Co-Chair of Governance Board




Phil Hodgson
Independent Chair of the Advisory Group




Suzanne Griffiths
Director

INTRODUCTION

The National Adoption Service for Wales is the collaboration for the provision of adoption services across Wales.

Since November 2014, it has brought together all local authority adoption services into five regional collaboratives, with co-ordination and leadership provided by a small central team and Director. Voluntary adoption agencies operating in Wales are key partners in the collaborative, as are other agencies including health and education.

CENTRAL TEAM



Gwasanaeth
Mabwysiadu | National
Cenedlaethol | Adoption
Service

National Adoption Service – Central Team

c/o City of Cardiff Council,
Room 409 County Hall, Atlantic Wharf,
Cardiff, CF10 4UW
029 2087 3927
contact@adoptcymru.com
www.adoptcymru.com

NORTH WALES

Isle of Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy,
Denbighshire, Flintshire, Wrexham



Gwasanaeth
Mabwysiadu | North Wales
Gogledd Cymru | Adoption
Service

North Wales Adoption Service

3rd Floor, Lambpit Street,
Wrexham, LL11 1AR
01978 295311
adoption@wrexham.gov.uk
www.northwalesadoption.gov.uk

MID & WEST WALES

Ceredigion, Powys, Carmarthenshire,
Pembrokeshire



Mabwysiadu
Canolbarth a Gogledd Cymru
Adoption
Mid & West Wales

Mid & West Wales Adoption

Building 1, St David's Park, Johnstown,
Carmarthenshire, SA31 3HB
01267 246970
adoptionenquires@carmarthenshire.gov.uk
www.adoptionmwwales.org.uk

Neuadd Brycheiniog, Cambrian Way,
Brecon, Powys, LD3 7HR
01597 827666
adoptionenquiries@carmarthenshire.gov.uk
www.adoptionmwwales.org.uk

WESTERN BAY

Swansea, Neath Port Talbot,
Bridgend



Western Bay
ADOPTION SERVICE
GWASANAETH MABWYSIADU
Bae'r Gogledd

Western Bay Adoption Service

Port Talbot Civic Centre,
Port Talbot CF131PJ
0300 365 2222
enquires@westernbayadoption.org
www.westernbayadoption.org

VALE, VALLEYS & CARDIFF

Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf,
Cardiff, Vale of Glamorgan



Vale, Valleys
and Cardiff
Adoption | **Mabwysiadu**
yn y Ffro, y Cymoedd
a Chae'r Dydd

Vale, Valleys & Cardiff Adoption

1st Floor, Dock Office,
Subway Road, Barry CF63 4RT
0800 0234 064
adoption@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk
www.adopt4vvc.org

SOUTH EAST WALES

Monmouthshire, Blaenau Gwent,
Torfaen, Caerphilly, Newport



South East Wales Adoption Service
Achieving More Together
Gwasanaeth Mabwysiadu Deddfwyrain Cymru
Cyflawni Mwy Gyda'n Gilydd!

South East Wales Adoption Service

North Wing, 2nd Floor Block B,
Mamhilad House, Mamhilad Parke Estate,
Pontypool, Torfaen, NP40HZ
01495 355766
adoption@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk
www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/3122.asp

ALL WALES VOLUNTARY ADOPTION AGENCIES SERVICES

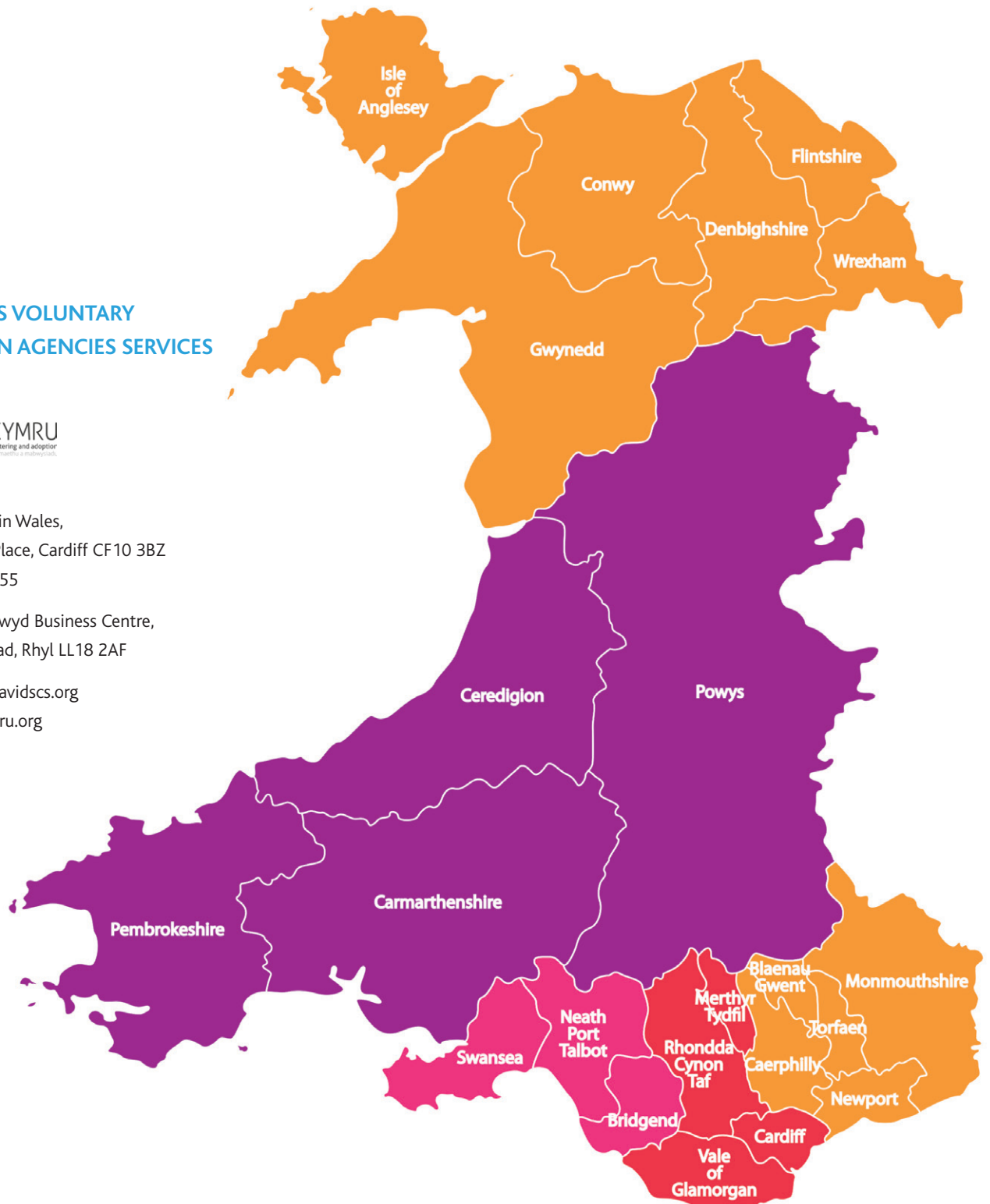


AFA Cymru

c/o Children in Wales,
25 Windsor Place, Cardiff CF10 3BZ
029 2076 1155

W2 Morfa Clwyd Business Centre,
84 Marsh Road, Rhyl LL18 2AF

Info-afa@stdavidscs.org
www.afacymru.org



Adoption UK

Penhaved Studios, Penhaved Street,
Grangetown, Cardiff, CF117LU
029 2023 0319
www.adoptionuk.org



Barnardo's Cymru

Trident Court, East Moors Road,
Cardiff, CF245TD
0800 0546 788
cymruadoptionandfostering@
barnardos.org.uk
www.barnardos.org.uk/adoption



St David's Children Society

28 Park Place, Cardiff, CF10 3BA
029 2066 7007
info@stdavidscs.org
www.adoptionwales.org



PRIORITIES FOR 2019/20

NAS' improvement priorities for 2019/20 are described below. This report demonstrates how much has been achieved.

PLACING MORE CHILDREN

- Increase recruitment of adopters to meet the number and needs of children waiting including use of 'Adopting Together' for children who wait longest
- Embed the new Adoption Register for Wales to speed up matching of children through quicker notification of children and adopters in line with revised regulations

CONTINUING TO IMPROVE ADOPTION SUPPORT

- Implementing the Adoption Support Framework and investment plans
- Continuing to raise awareness amongst professionals and the public

THINKING AHEAD

- Continuing to co-produce and use information from engagement
- Using data from the revised performance measurement system
- Working to improve the legal, policy and evidence framework that affects adoption
- Encouraging the development of workforce understanding and skills to meet NAS priorities

WELSH GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT

During 2019/20 the Welsh Government investment of £2.3m in adoption services began and an additional £100k, in a 'one off' grant, was made available to fund a second 'burst' of our adopter recruitment campaign.

The Central Team and the five Regions were each allocated a proportion of the £2.3m investment. The majority of the investment was used to create capacity in new and additional services in both local government and the voluntary sector.

The additional £100k allowed NAS to extend the period of television, radio and outside of home advertising at supermarkets and buses.

PLACING MORE CHILDREN

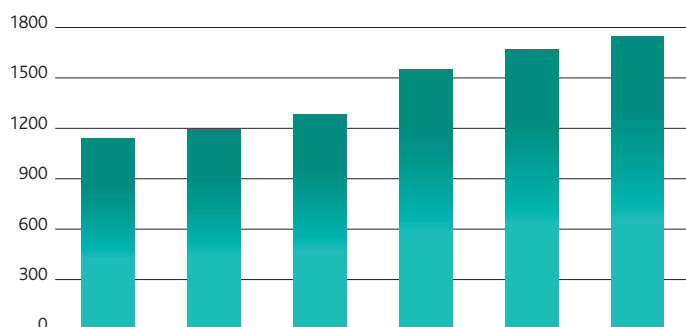
Increase recruitment of adopters to meet the number and needs of children waiting, including using the new 'Adopting Together' service for children who wait longest

ADOPTERS – TRENDS IN APPROVALS, ENQUIRIES AND NEW ASSESSMENTS

Our aim is to recruit more adopters, to place more children in a timely way and to have choice in meeting the needs of children for whom adoption is the plan.

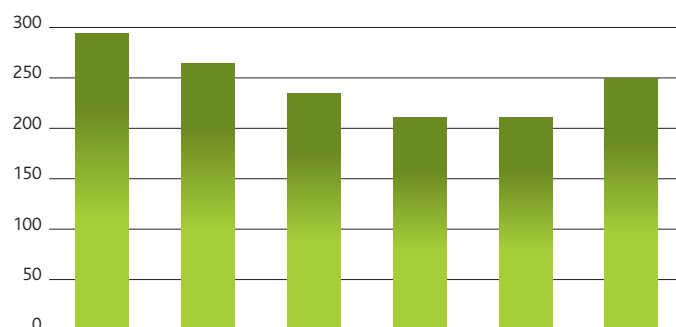
- Adopter approvals increased by 18% overall, new enquiries by a further 5% and there was also a small increase of 3% in adopter assessments commencing.
- Nearly half of adopters were approved within 6 months of their application; on average it takes 6.5 months for an adopter to be approved which is positive and in line with guidance.
- The number of approved adopters waiting for a match at the end of the year increased.
- The gap between families needed and adopters available reduced during 2019/20 by 26% to circa 170 families.

Number of initial enquiries



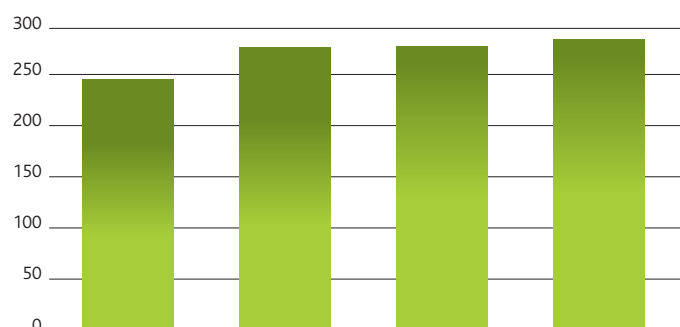
2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
1,161	1,197	1,280	1,550	1,687	1,764

Number of adopters approved



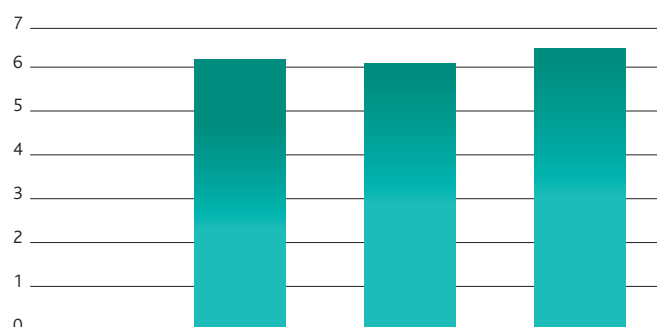
2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
294	266	236	212	212	250

Number of adopter assessments started



2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
246	277	278	286

Average timeframe (months) from application to adopter approval



	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Months	6.2	6.1	6.5

Benchmark: 6 months or less



Recruitment drive at Pride



Exhibiting at the National Eisteddfod for Wales



HOW ARE WE IMPROVING RECRUITMENT?

- We created and delivered a new recruitment campaign **#become the parent only you could be** that featured real adopters from our adoption champions which was shown on TV, on buses and in supermarkets as well as on social media. commencing during National Adoption Week in October 2019.
- The Welsh Government invested an additional £100,000 to enable a second 'burst' of the campaign from January 2020 onwards.
- The above was facilitated by Cowshed PR and Communications with whom we now have a contract to support national and regional/agency marketing.
- Cowshed assisted in co-ordinating staff from services across Wales to work together on recruitment 'stands' at a number of high-profile events such as the National Eisteddfod for Wales and Pride.
- All Regions now have a Marketing and Recruitment Officer in post to support the recruitment campaigns as well as respond to initial enquiries.
- Revised information for adopters about making an enquiry.
- New leaflet to accompany the recruitment campaign.
- New guidance for staff on dealing with enquiries, and
- The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section on the website was updated to 'bust myths' about who can adopt based on a survey undertaken during the summer events.

ADOPTING TOGETHER SERVICE

2019/20 was the first full year of the Adopting Together Service (ATS) which was developed by the Welsh Voluntary Adoption Services for NAS in order to find and support families for children waiting longest for adoptive homes in Wales.

It provides specialist adopter recruitment, enhanced training for adopters, peer buddying, and customised therapeutic and psychological support to adopters through this service.

The service has placed 14 children for adoption since it was launched in June 2018: 8 during 2019/20. At time of writing the service was considering 46 active referrals and undertaking 2 child specific recruitment campaigns.

Ben adopted a sibling group with his partner talked about their experience of Adopting Together:

"Adopting Together enabled us to have more of an open mind with what we thought we were looking for, and we quickly realised there was no point overlooking children just because they didn't fit our initial perceptions of the 'ideal' age. With older children, you have a much clearer picture of how they are developing than you might have with a baby."

Embed the Adoption Register for Wales, to speed up matching of children through quicker notification of children and adopters, in line with revised regulations.



Cofrestr Fabwysiadu **Cymru**
Adoption Register **Wales**

ADOPTION REGISTER WALES

The new Adoption Register for Wales (ARW) was launched in June 2019. It is a fully bilingual, online family finding service with managed adopter access. Using Link Maker, a quick and easy to use secure system, the Register supports services in Wales to match children with adopters and reduce their waiting time.

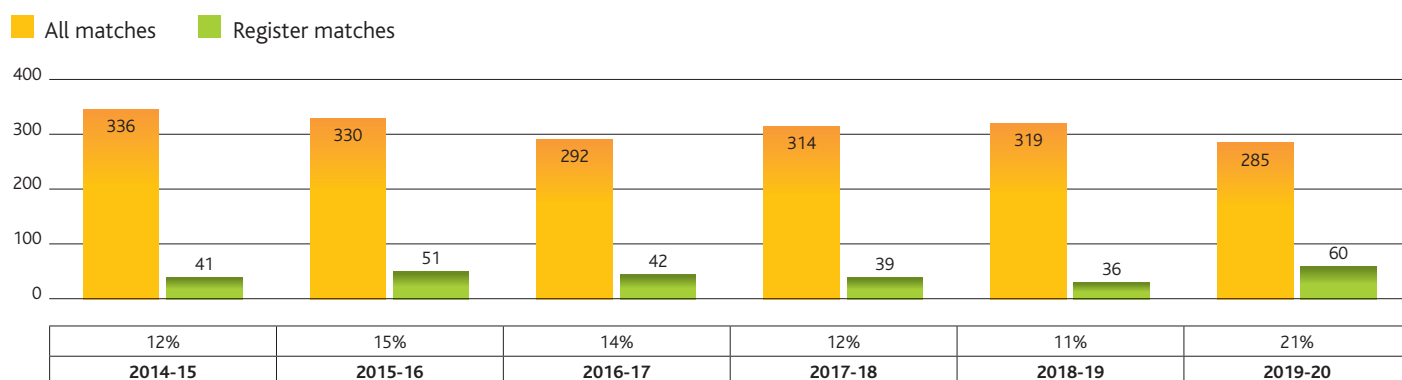
ADOPTION REGISTER ACTIVITY

308 children were referred alongside 193 prospective adopters who had either self-registered or been referred by their agencies. This is a similar number of children to the previous year but 62% more adopters, which may be linked to adopters being able to access the service directly and the change in the regulations whereby children and adopters should be referred earlier.

A total of 285 matches have occurred in Wales this year, 60 of which were identified via the register, a comparison with 36 and 39 from previous years. This is a significant increase on previous years to 21%, given that matches via the register had varied between 11% and 15%.

As the new register becomes more firmly embedded we will continue to analyse these trends.

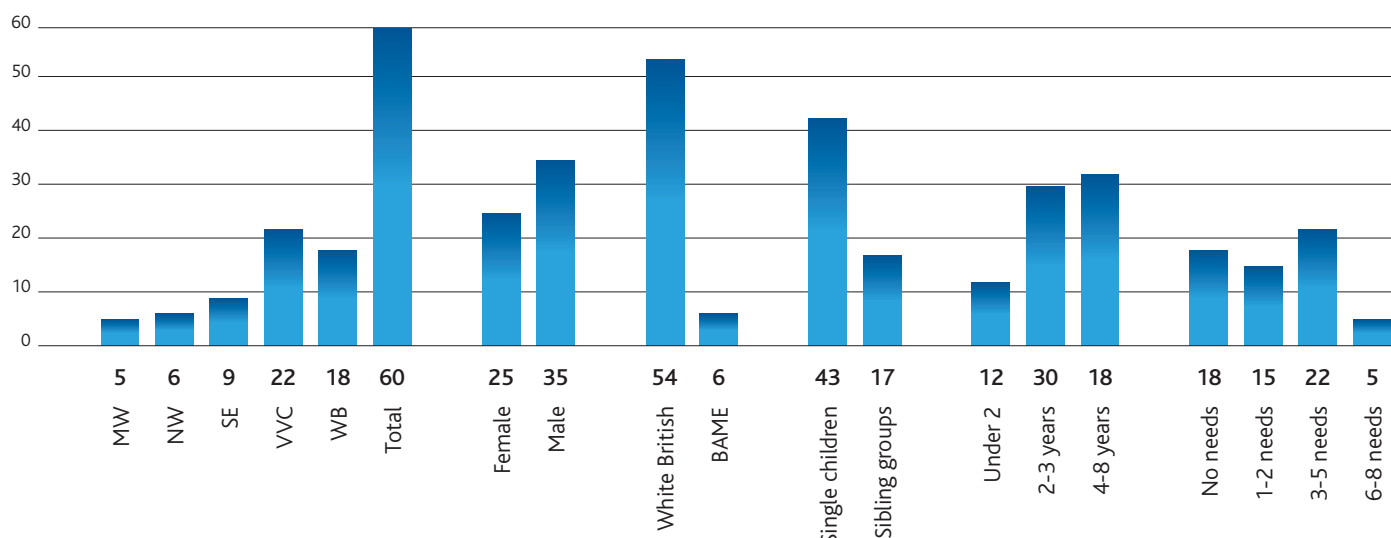
Register Matches



Matches

The graph below shows 70% (n42) of the 60 children placed via the register were children who might wait longer for placement due to their identified additional needs or increased likelihood of additional needs. It also shows that 80% (n48) were over 2 years of age, 70% (n41) had attachment difficulties and 36% (n22) were classed as having behavioural difficulties and/or emotional difficulties.

Matches made through ARW 2019-20

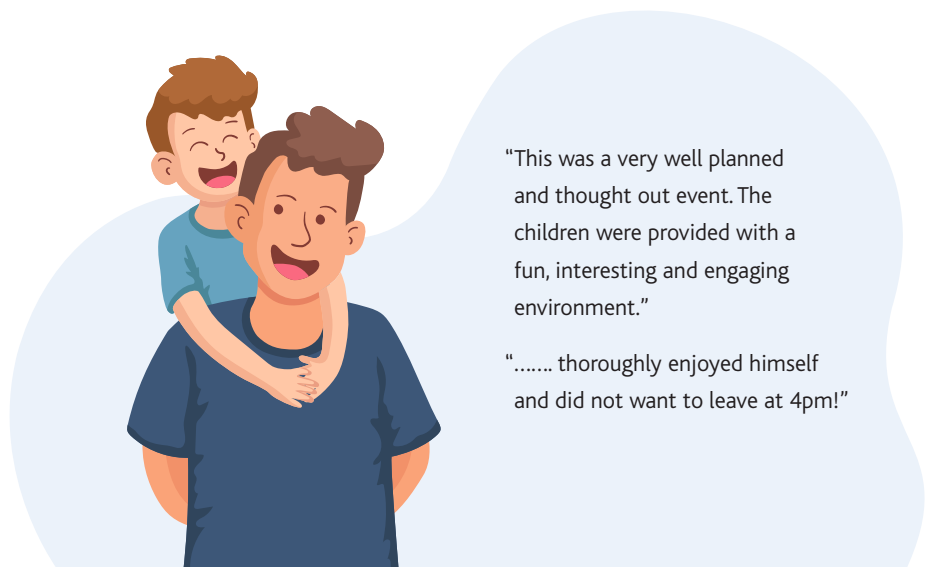




A 4th **Adoption Activity Day** was held in Wales in March 2020. These have become an established method of matching children waiting for adoptive placement, particularly for children who have been waiting longer to find potential adoptive families, some of whom may have additional needs. The event this year followed a similar schedule as had proved successful in previous years although due to the emerging Covid-19 situation required some adjustments.

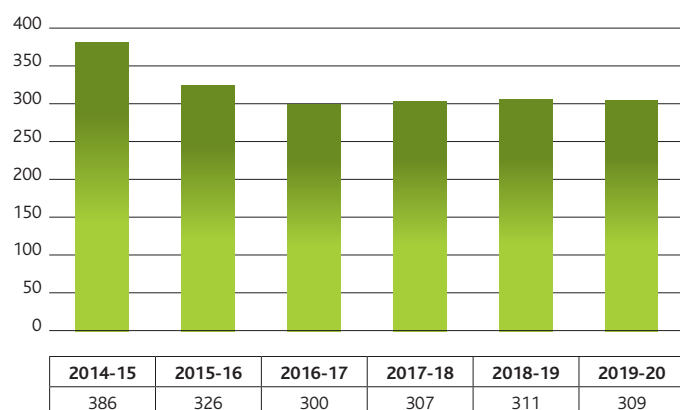
As a result, there were 17 expressions of interest (compared to 14 in 2018/19) from families and these are in the process of being followed up.

There were also two Exchange Days held during the year in Cardiff and Colwyn Bay respectively. A total of 27 families attended with 136 children profiled, the majority being part of sibling groups and with complex needs. As a result of these events there were 4 successful matches (in comparison to 3 in 2018/19).



What was the overall impact on placing children in 19/20?

Number of children placed for adoption

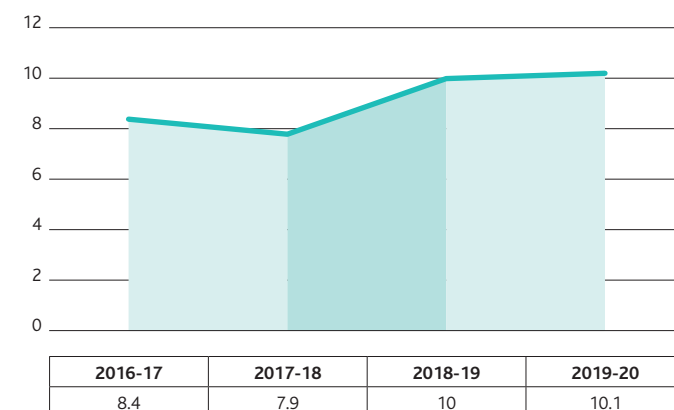


The number of children waiting for an adoption placement reduced during 2019/20.

- Overall 309 children were placed, a similar number to the last three years.
- Circa 270 adoption orders were granted for children already placed.
- The number of children waiting at the end of the year (31.03.20) reduced to 270. This included a further 68 children with a 'firm link' which was likely to be agreed plus 22 children who were likely to have their status changed back to long term 'looked after'.
- As such there was active family finding for 179 children at the end of the year.



Average timeframe (in months) from PO to PFA



Research and best practice emphasise the importance to children of being placed as soon as possible after their placement order is made.

- Average timescales for children being placed remained relatively static at 10.1 months, albeit a little above the benchmark of 8 months as outlined in guidance.

2019/20 saw some changes in demand for adoption with a reduction in children being referred, albeit not as large as that seen in 2015/16 after two significant High Court judgements.

- Referrals dropped by 21% from 2018/19 – all regions experienced a reduction.
- Placement orders dropped by 19% (n63) – all regions except for Mid & West Wales experienced a reduction.

The reasons for this are likely to be varied and will reflect the work being done by local authorities, with the Welsh Government, to reduce levels of 'looked after' children in Wales, including the positive impact of 'Edge of Care' and 'Reflect' services.

For adoption services this provides an opportunity to focus on further reducing the level of children waiting. It remains the case that circa one fifth of all children leaving the looked after system permanently do this through adoption.

CONTINUING TO IMPROVE ADOPTION SUPPORT



Implementing the Adoption Support Framework and investment plans

In 2016 NAS developed its strategic plan for the development of adoption support services in Wales.

With its distinctive umbrella symbol, the vision over time was to guarantee a 'Core Offer' of support for all Welsh adopted children and young people and their parents, as well as to others affected by adoption.

It is intended that this 'Core Offer' will:

- equip adoptive families at the start and support their early days to encourage healthy and confident families;
- provide effective information, advice or support as and when families need it and in a timely way so any issues that arise are less likely to escalate into more serious issues; and
- Provide ongoing support or easy re-entry to services where it is needed.

Realising this vision was given a huge boost when Welsh Government announced a £2.3m investment package from April 2019. The investment covered 14 objectives.

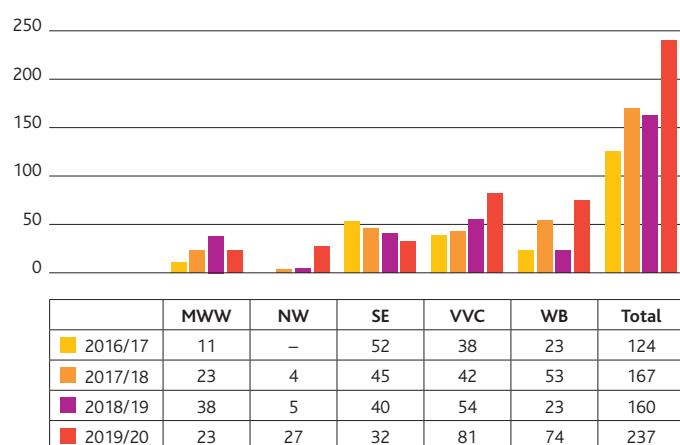


OVERVIEW OF ADOPTION SUPPORT PROVISION DURING 2019/20

The number of children whose plan included support from the time of placement remained relatively stable during 2019/20, comprising circa 35% of children placed. Although this remains a fairly low percentage, it is an increase from the estimates of circa 25% in the research that pre-dated NAS, as well as that undertaken by ourselves in 2015/16.

Similarly there was also an increase in the number of new assessments for adoption support carried out. These are for families / children who are not in receipt of ongoing support who develop support needs. This increased to 237 from 170 the previous year with increases concentrated in three regions.

Number of completed new assessments in respect of children that are currently not receiving an adoption support service



More than two thirds of new assessments result in therapeutic or practical support being provided, with the numbers of families receiving one off financial payments and adoption allowances continuing to decline slightly.

Taken together the above shows that more adoption support is being offered and taken up both before placement and post adoption.

In terms of other adoption support services:

- The number of active letterbox arrangements reached 3,819, an increase from last year. These are important links for adopted children helping them to gain information about their birth families and help them understand about their history;
- The overall level of requests from birth siblings for an assessment rose significantly, but this was largely concentrated in one region as a result of work focusing on this, with the trend across the other regions being a fall in requests;
- Requests for access to birth records also declined by a small amount overall, with some regions increasing and others reducing; and
- Requests for intermediary services also fell overall with all but one region experiencing a reduction.

THE NAS ADOPTION SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

2019/20 saw the first year of funding from the Welsh Government to implement specific elements of the Adoption Support Framework at national and regional levels, including some commissioned services from voluntary sector partners.

This £2.3m investment package was warmly welcomed by NAS and its partners enabling the first steps towards the step change in services that we want to make.



Implementation of the TESSA programme

The Therapeutic, Education and Support Services in Adoption (TESSA) programme is a Wales wide initiative that aims to empower adoptive parents, who are raising traumatised children, by giving them early access to a clinical psychologist as well as peer support. Research shows that up to two-thirds of adoptive parents in Wales require professional support at some point.

Adoption UK are our strategic partner for this initiative. Investment funding provides 5 regional posts and part funds the national infrastructure for this service, which also receives a share of UK wide Big Lottery and Communities Funding.

The service began delivery in November 2019, having spent the preceding months recruiting and training experienced parent partners to provide peer support across Wales and establishing the psychology service that undertakes assessments and provides support groups.

By the end of March the service had received 42 referrals. These families were all being supported by a parent partner and either had, or had planned in their assessment and/or support sessions, albeit that during March the service model switched to on-line due to Coronavirus. 16 consultations were held, 1 group involving 5 families delivered and 1 enhanced provision around child to parent violence.

Mary is one of the adoptive parents who is currently receiving peer support from Julie one of the parent partners. Mary and her partner adopted their son when he was nine months old. By the time he was four he had already gone through five nursery and school settings, all of which had broken down. Mary said: *"The lowest point came following the termination of one placement when we were told that he was "a naughty and nasty child who was bad for business". Mary recalled: "We were told about TESSA by Adoption UK and within weeks we had spent some quality time with a psychologist who helped us to piece together the jigsaw of our son's life and together we started to explore how we could approach things through his eyes. The support didn't stop there – we were partnered with a peer who also came to our house to listen and share experience. Less than two months on we've a detailed view of our son's needs; strategies to help ensure he feels happy and reassurance that we're doing the right things."*

Mary added: "We now look forward to working towards finding the right placement for our son to achieve his potential in September when he starts school."

A very successful Psychology symposium was held in early March, attended by more than 97 participants, where psychologists and other professionals joined with adoptive parents to discuss the TESSA approach and its roll out across Wales.

"The whole day was very good, it was well organised there were friendly faces on arrival. The food and singing were excellent. I really liked the message that it is the family and the environment that makes the difference for children's development and it's isn't about 'fixing the child'."

The conference was opened by the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services Julie Morgan MS, followed by an address from Lyne Neagle MS who, as chair of the National Assembly for Wales Children, Young People and Education Committee, was responsible for the influential 'Mind over Matter' report.



NEW NATIONAL SUPPORT AND INFORMATION SERVICE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

During 2019/20 the new 'Connected' service worked with 84 children and young people, alongside planning to expand into all parts of Wales in partnership with the NAS regions.

Adoption UK are our strategic partner for this initiative. Investment funding provided 5.6 posts, one national co-ordinator post and one in each of the Regions.

There are the four key elements to this service nationally:

1. Connected groups which will be available across Wales;
2. Information and advice – About adoption available to young people through the same channels that they access other information;
3. Being heard and respected – Gathering the views and priorities of adopted children and young people and feed them into regional and national plans in a systematic and fully participative way. It includes a young adopted adult's ambassador scheme with two young adults already signed up; and
4. Awareness and upskilling – Awareness raising and upskilling mainstream youth/play services to ensure they understand and respond better to the needs of adopted children and young people.

The existing connected groups have provided much positive feedback on the benefits of spending time with their peers in the sessions:

"It is good because I don't have to explain things to them and they don't say stupid things like 'what happened to your real mum then?'"

"My friends at school don't get what it is like to be adopted and I can't talk to them about it. When I have tried before, they didn't understand what I was talking about. I like being with other adopted kids because I don't feel like I am the only one."

"Yes to me it's just 'normal' being adopted, so to meet other people who are normal like me is great."



Charlotte is a young ambassador

"Some people might call me an adoptee, I call myself an adopted person, but day to day you can call me Charlotte because that's my name and I prefer my labels on clothes not people. There are so many positives associated with adoption however there are also some negatives experienced as well. Everyone is different and experiences and feels adoption differently. Being adopted to me, means being given a second chance at life. I grew up with an incredible set of kind and supportive parents who gave me age appropriate information throughout my life and so I'd always known I was adopted I just hadn't always fully grasped what it meant and the impact it would have on me and my life and it wasn't until I fully understood what being adopted meant, that I started to feel a sense of loss.

The way I would describe transitioning from knowing I was adopted to understanding I was adopted is experiencing the feelings of the grieving process, and I dealt with each feeling at a different age and time in my life. Denial being the stage where I knew I was adopted but didn't fully understand what it meant. In my teens I experienced the anger, bargaining and depression and guilt stages of the process where I understood what adoption was but it led to the 'why, what, how' questions that made me feel angry thinking of the likely answers and not having a way to find out. I would often fantasize about my biological parents and what it would be like to meet them and then when I really began to understand that my fantasies wouldn't be reality, that's when the depression and guilt hit because I didn't have a life story book, I felt a sense of loss because I was told different things by different people throughout my life that it didn't feel like my story, it felt like a bunch of people each contributing a piece to the puzzle that was my life. And I wanted to experience building that puzzle, so when I understood that the control wasn't necessarily mine, it hurt.

When I was first told about talk adoption I won't lie, it was daunting because I hadn't ever really talked to anyone else about my adoption and had always kept my experience on the down low so it felt like I ripping a plaster off a cut that hadn't quite healed yet, and showing the world. I was 14 when I was luckily introduced to talk adoption and the wonderful Ruth Letten, who has unknowingly been my life coach throughout the process, she gave me a safe space to explore and process all my emotions and feelings in an authentic way, through art, communication, drama, and engaging with other adopted young people, while also encouraging and allowing me to be 100% unapologetically myself. I was both nervous and excited to see what talk adoption was all about and I didn't for a second anticipate just how impactful it would be for me and so many other young adopted people.

Talk adoption [now 'Connected'] has been one of the greatest things to have been created in the last decade because it's helped shape me as a person and has given me so great opportunities to get my voice and the voices of other adopted people heard. Without the continued encouragement and support from both my parents and Ruth, I wouldn't have been able to reach the final stage of the grieving process, acceptance and for that I'm forever thankful and in debt. Since reaching the stage of acceptance I have been able to change my mind set from 'why did this happen' to 'how can I help others through their struggles and that's why I've put more time into volunteering at the talk adoption groups rather than using the service, because I realised I no longer needed help but I still want to help others and hope others can benefit from my experience."



EMBEDDING THE NEW LIFE JOURNEY MATERIALS FRAMEWORK

NAS continues to work on improving the content, quality and availability of Life Journey Materials for adopted children, young people and their families. We've continued to work on and implement the new Framework and Good Practice Guide for Life Journey work in Wales which was launched in 2016.

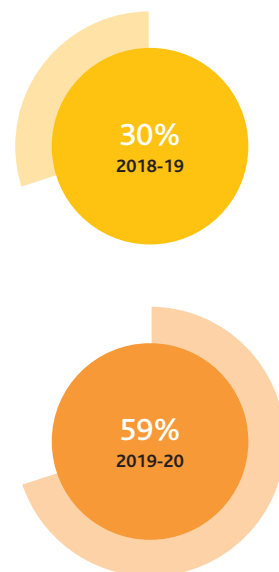
All children who cannot be cared for by their birth families, need to have an understanding of their family history and their unique journey through life journey materials which support a child's identity, promote self-esteem, and help give the child a sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Working with staff across Wales and supported by AFA Cymru, the on-line resources have been increased with additional guides and tools for birth parents and foster carers added this year. Work is ongoing to make the ever increasing range of on line resources for this work accessible and usable by both adoptive parents and staff.

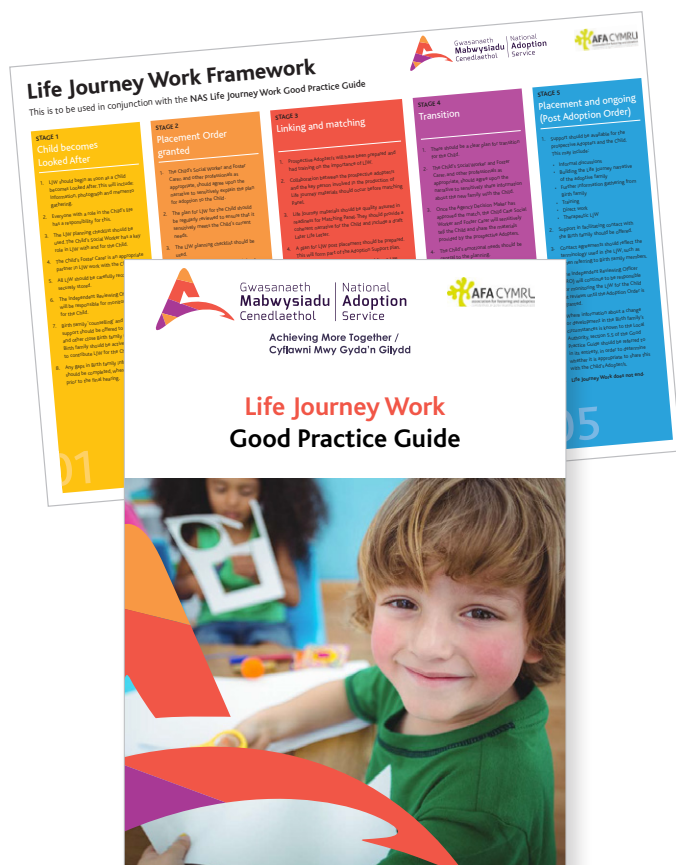
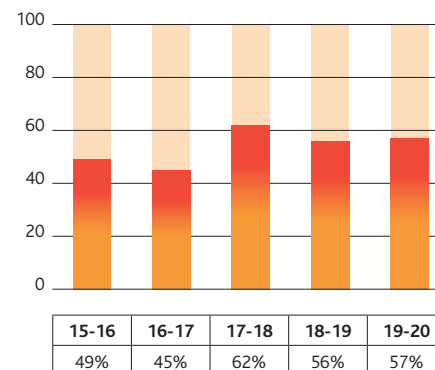
The investment funding has enabled a champion 'co-ordinator' post to be created in each of the five NAS regions, in order to better implement the approach consistently. One region has used some of its funding to create posts in its local authorities to deepen this consistency with staff who manage children's cases.

- The proportion of children whose life journey work was available at the time they were matched, has improved significantly to 59%.
- The impact on availability of life journey work at the second adoption review is less clear currently although, at 57%, the slow upwards trend continues.
- There are now up to 14 posts across Wales focused on this important area of work with some impact becoming clear; there have been significant improvements in the region that is using investment to work on this in its local authorities.

Proportion of children who had their Life Journey materials at matching panel



Proportion of children who had their Life Journey materials at second adoption review





NEW BEST PRACTICE APPROACHES

Afa Cymru have been commissioned as our strategic partner for this work. Drawing in relevant research and expertise and working with regions, VAA's across Wales and the central team, they are supporting NAS to develop new best practice approaches to:

- Transitions and early placement support (including Adopting Together);
- Contact arrangements for adopted children;
- Work with birth parents; and
- An updated good practice framework and approach to adoption support assessment, planning and review.

Alongside this, regions have invested in capacity to begin to deliver improved ways of working in these areas.

Placing children and providing early support

During the year Afa Cymru have been developing the 'good practice guides', drawing on the expertise and developing services that exist in regions and VAA's, as well as drawing on research and existing models. It is in final draft with plans to launch during 2020/21.

The aim is that all children and adoptive families in Wales will benefit from a consistent and supported approach to introductions, placement and early support shaped to their needs. Investment funding provides 5 posts with each region investing in staff capacity to implement these approaches.

The investment funding in 2019/20 also subsidised the local authority costs of the Adopting Together placements made in 2019/20.

A NEW BEST PRACTICE FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH TO CONTACT

As above Afa Cymru have been developing the 'good practice guides', drawing on the expertise and developing services that exist in regions and VAA's as well as drawing on research, existing models and linking into the other work that has been continuing in Wales. This is also in a final draft stage with plans to launch during 2020/21 and there are posts funded in two regions.

- The Central Team continues to work with Voices from Care (VfC), Children in Wales and other partners (AUK, Afa Cymru, Children in Wales, Cardiff University, the Fostering Network) to respond to the Children's Commissioner for Wales 2016/17 recommendation that "The Welsh Government should work with the National Adoption Service (NAS) to ensure that siblings' rights to contact are fully considered during adoption care planning". This has become known as the 'Sibling Alliance'.
- As a result of this collaborated with the Children's Legal Centre for Wales to produce and publish an 'Advice Leaflet' on contact for children and young people who are adopted or looked after.
- The Sibling Alliance are currently developing a 'pledge' for children and young people who are separated from their siblings. The intention is that this will gain the support from all public and voluntary organisations to make improvements. This is currently at the consultation stage after which it will be shared widely with all professional stakeholders, Ministers and the Judiciary in order to steer improved practice in planning for contact.

A NEW FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH TO WORKING WITH BIRTH PARENTS

Again, AfA Cymru have been developing the 'good practice guides' drawing on the expertise and developing services in regions and VAA's, as well as drawing on research and existing models alongside considering the linkages with the network of **Reflect**¹ projects that are now in place across Wales. This will also be launched in 2020/21. Three of the regions have created 4 posts to support work with birth parents.

During 2019/20 more than 330 birth parents took up services from the NAS regions. There were more than 650 birth parents referred of which a high percentage were offered a service; take up in the first year is low but improves considerably when looking at parents from previous years. Again, take up is improved in those regions where the investment has been used to improve the service.

In one region the relationship with the **Reflect** service ensures birth parents are supported with some elements of adoption process. In South East Wales the **Reflect** process, to support birth parents and families at their farewell contact to their children, is based on constructive and positive information sharing and decision making. Birth parent feelings and wishes are included in when and how the final contact takes place. Birth parents are given help in travelling to the contact, preparing activities, taking photographs – anything to maximise the parent's time with their child. The photographs are used to support birth parents complete life story work for their child. These simple steps can make a difference to birth parents experiences of such a traumatic day and make it more bearable as they will feel more prepared and more in control.

AN UPDATED BEST PRACTICE FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH TO ADOPTION SUPPORT ASSESSMENT, PLANNING AND REVIEW

AfA Cymru have also been working on this, albeit that this commenced last, as it needs to gather in the principles from the above guides as well as focus on the legal and regulatory elements. One region has used its investment to create an additional post to focus on improving this.

IMPLEMENTATION OF INDIVIDUALISED PLANS FOR ADOPTER POST APPROVAL TRAINING/ DEVELOPMENT

The 12 post adoption training modules for adopters, developed in conjunction with AfA Cymru and Adoption UK and in consultation with adoption practitioners and adopters, have been launched and are now on the NAS website.

They are intended to help and support adopters to weave together an understanding of what they need to know and the skills they need to develop to build and continue to improve their relationship with their child.

They are available on the website for people to access individually or for trainers to download and use in group training. The modules were piloted in the NAS regions by AUK.

Approximately 160 people attended 15 different training events hosted by Adoption UK Cymru (AUK) using these post adoption training modules during 2019/20. These were delivered across all the regions and included the following titles: Life Journey Work, Health and Development, Living with Challenging Behaviours, Non-Violent Resistance and Contact with Birth Families. Approximately 75% of the attendees were adoptive parents or prospective adopters and the rest were professionals working with adoptive families.

Feedback from staff is positive:

- 'a very thought-provoking course with lots of perspectives on contact' – parent who attended a course on Contact.
- 'really useful course, reminded me of a lot I had forgotten, feeling much more positive and able to manage as feel encouraged that I will be able to do it' – adoptive parent on a course for 2nd time adopters.
- 'this course was amazing, wish we had had it years ago, it might have made a big difference to our family' – adopter who attended a Challenging behaviour course.

One region has an active existing training officer post and a second region used investment to create a new post. In the latter, Mid and West Wales, almost 150 adopters and more than 40 foster carers attended training provided by the region during 2019/20. The region has also piloted an e-learning programme which 21 adopters and a number of staff have completed. Feedback from the e-learning has been positive in terms of content and accessibility, with a high completion rate by adopters as well as professionals.

¹ 'Reflect' is a service that aims to provide practical and emotional support to women and their partners who have experienced the compulsory and permanent removal of a child /ren from their care. Parents are supported for a period of time and given tailor-made help.

IMPROVING THE RANGE OF TARGETED/ SPECIALIST THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT AVAILABLE THROUGH HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND EDUCATION

Investment funding provides 6.9 posts which are used according to regional need for example:

- in South East Wales additional capacity in the existing psychology service is being funded meaning circa 40 additional children and families have been supported, there have been excess of 130 additional direct therapy sessions and 7 training and support sessions for staff have been provided; and
- in three other regions posts have been created and staff trained to provide therapeutic services such as play therapy and DDP.

Feedback from parents in Mid & West Wales included:

"Great to have this adoption support as area has been neglected"

"Thank you, this help is really making a difference"

"without this help we would have suffered a family breakdown as I couldn't cope"

"... seen a marked improvement in behaviours and X is more settled in general".

AN 'ADOPTION AWARENESS' KITE MARK SCHEME DEVELOPED AND ROLLED OUT

One region is developing a kite mark for adoption awareness, which may be something to extend across Wales in the future.

REDUCING DELAY, ENSURING THE WIDEST CHOICE OF PLACEMENTS OR IMPROVING MATCHING FOR CHILDREN

There was some flexibility in the investment offer to support other adoption functions. Two regions opted to use this to create a fulltime and part time Marketing and Recruitment Officers respectively. Their role is to increase enquiries from prospective adopters and provide support for each contact made.

These additional posts mean that all region now have these posts which is benefitting our ability to recruit adopters.



Continuing to raise awareness amongst professionals and the public

Adoption is a feature of community life where adoptive families live, work and play including health, education. A key function of the National Adoption service is to keep and raise awareness amongst professionals and the public.

2019/20 saw the launch of leaflets and information for health professionals. This was developed in partnership with health colleagues and has now been circulated widely to community and hospital settings across Wales where Health professionals work. The aim is to help them better understand 'adoption' to inform the best way to work with the adopted children and families that they see.

NAS contributes to a wide range of the Welsh Government's all Wales work-streams; this contributes to us improving adoption awareness amongst professionals as well as informing policy to ensure that other developments, including in mainstream services that adoptive families use, are 'adoption aware'. During 2019/20 this included the below:

- Ministerial Advisory Group on Improving Outcomes for Children;
- Welsh Government 'Parenting Advisory Group'; and
- NAS is seeking to engage in the work on **Strengthening and extending Corporate Parenting in Wales** to ensure that principles, in respect of adopted children, that NAS negotiated into the current version in 2015, are retained in future guidance.



THINKING AHEAD



Continuing to co-produce and use information from engagement

The voice of the service user is paramount in the National Adoption Service and leads policy development and service provision.



ADOPTERS

NAS published a response to the 2018/19 Adoption Voices consultation with adopters outlining how it is responding to the issues raised.

Taking a 'What you said' and 'What we are doing' approach this updates adopters on topics such as CAMHS and emotional wellbeing service, Contact and adopter assessment.

Adoption UK have been commissioned to review the NAS Adoption Voices programme in light of its ongoing plans for the Adoption Barometer.

Alison Woodhead AUK Head of Communications and Ann Bell presented the findings for Wales of the Barometer at the first NAS combined Governance Board in July. The main findings were:

- More adopters had later life letters and life journey materials in Wales;
- Twice as likely to have been made a definite choice not to meet birth family members (social worker influence);
- 71% know where to go for post adoption support. 77% well informed;
- Very high level of need amongst adopted children. 26% had statements compared to 5% of children in Wales generally; and
- Much more training and resource needed for schools.





There were recommendations for Regions and VAA's as below; AUK have followed these up with all regional management boards and VAA's:

- All children should have a clear, written support plan agreed before placement, based on a therapeutic assessment;
- Services should review the advice given to new adopters to keep friends and family at a distance during early placement. Instead, improved guidance for adoptive family's support networks so that they can support early placement without disrupting attachment and settling in should be provided; and
- Services should review and revise the advice social workers give adopters regarding meeting with birth parents prior to adoption.

Alongside the above, regions have been:

- Facilitating family activity events to further develop stakeholder engagement and sustainability of support networks;
- Consulting with adopters to inform training; and
- Establishing feedback processes to learn what individual services do well and improve on areas of concern.

Children and Young People – Engagement is a key feature of the new 'Connect' services for children and young people; it is hoped that the services will, in future, achieve the participation standards. At time of writing, consultation is ongoing with children and young people across Wales to inform the ongoing development of the service which also includes an ambassador scheme as outlined earlier.

Children's Commissioner for Wales – NAS, through the central team, meets with Sally Holland annually to discuss adoption issues and monitor NAS in relation to recommendations she has made in her Annual Reports.

A small proportion of the Children's Commissioners casework is clearly adoption related, circa 3% in the year prior to the 2019/20 meeting. The themes below have been discussed with regions and are informing policy and practice development:

- Adoption support – not getting what's needed, having to 'fight' for funding and support;
- Foster carers – dissatisfaction with decisions re assessments as adopters and their role if a placement disrupts;
- Prospective Adopters – applications not accepted / assessment delays; and
- Birth parents – seeking advice on challenging decisions etc.

Using data

A REVISED PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT SYSTEM

The new Performance Management System, supported by Data Cymru, went live at the beginning of 2019/20. The improvements include:

- the regions having their data at local authority level which helps identify variations; and
- supporting regional consistency in reporting to their Regional Management Boards.



SUPPORTING AND INVESTING IN RESEARCH

NAS continues to support the Wales Adoption Cohort Study in its efforts to gain ongoing funding and in promoting the publication of its research papers.

Professor Katherine Shelton is a member of the NAS Combined Governance Board; at its February meeting she provided an overview of the most recent research, 'The neurocognitive profiles of children adopted from care and their emotional and behavioural problems at home and school' helping the board to begin to understand some of the potential implications for practice.

To date the study has published more than 15 research papers in a variety of peer reviewed journals, with some free to download from this Cardiff University website:

<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/view/44107-shelton-katherine>

EVALUATION OF THE NAS ADOPTION SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

Following an open procurement process the Institute of Public Care were selected as the academic partner for this piece of planned work. This will evaluate the impact of the changes that NAS has made to the way we support adoptive families in Wales, including a focus on the early impact of the recent Welsh Government investment. This work will commence in 2020/21.

Working to improve the legal, policy and evidence framework that affects adoption

NAS contributes to a wide range of the Welsh Government's all Wales workstreams. This contributes to us improving adoption awareness amongst professionals, as well as informing policy to ensure that other developments, including in mainstream services that adoptive families use, are 'adoption aware'.

MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP ON IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

- The NAS plans, in respect of increasing recruitment and improving adoption support, are part of the 'Improving Placement Choice and Stability' workstream. Updates are provided to each meeting.
- Following the January 2020 meeting, NAS was able to input into the work on the new strategy for vulnerable learners through contact with Sir Alistair McDonald, Welsh Government.
- At the same meeting, the importance of NAS maintaining involvement in the continuation of the 'Together for Children and Young People' programme was emphasised.

NAS is represented on the Welsh Government 'Parenting Advisory Group'. This is one aspect of the work to implement the Children Bill Wales and the withdrawal of the defence of reasonable chastisement. This is to ensure that appropriate advice and information is passed through to adoptive parents.

NAS continues to work on the 'Mind over Matter' agenda with AWHOCS and WLGA. This report by National Assembly Children Young People and Education Committee focuses on improving CAMHS / services to support the emotional well-being of children. During 2019/20 NAS collaborated with AWHOCS and WLGA to send in a joint response to a request to evaluate progress and the Director participated in a Committee workshop.

This year also saw the fruition of some policy changes that we have been working on in previous years.

- In October 2019 the Welsh Government implemented revised regulations for the Adoption Register for Wales, which require agencies to use the Register sooner for both children and prospective adopters. This is an important step in supporting services to match children in as timely a way as possible.
- The regulations to introduce a revised way of conducting the assessment of prospective adopters were consulted on and came into force from April 1st 2020. The '2 Stage Process' is more transparent by grouping the initial checks e.g. medical, police, references into a first stage to be completed satisfactorily, before prospective adopters can progress to the in depth 'suitability' assessment in Stage 2.

Revised guidance for staff and adopters and leaflets are available.

<https://adoptcymru.com/the-adoption-process>

Note: At time of writing, due to C-19, the full implementation of this '2 Stage Process' has been paused temporarily with the agreement of Welsh Government so that agencies can continue to run both stages alongside each other.

We continue to lobby for improvements in the legislative entitlement to adoption support.

NAS REVIEW OF ARRANGEMENTS

This work is ongoing, having been commissioned by WLGA and ADSS Cymru as NAS' lead organisations; the Institute for Public Care are commissioned to work with us to achieve greater accountability in the arrangements for NAS.

- The first part of the work in this current phase was to combine the former Advisory Group and Governance Board. This has been concluded with the Combined Governance Board meeting for the first time, in July 2019 with revised Terms of Reference.

The first Combined Governance Board combined a workshop with a business meeting where members agreed principles for working within the meetings as well as revised Terms of Reference.

- The second element of the current work is developing the new operating model for NAS, which was agreed last year. IPC have undertaken consultation with a sample of local government stakeholders including Members, Directors of Social Services, Heads of Children's Services, Regional Adoption Managers and some staff.

This has produced a revised 'Partnership Agreement' for NAS replacing the original functional model and set out key elements of the way NAS will operate in the future. This will be finalised and implemented during 2020/21.

Encouraging the development of workforce understanding and skills to meet NAS priorities

AUK delivered 26 courses in total and also included Adopting for the 2nd Time, Therapy Maze and a more in depth 3 session NVR course.

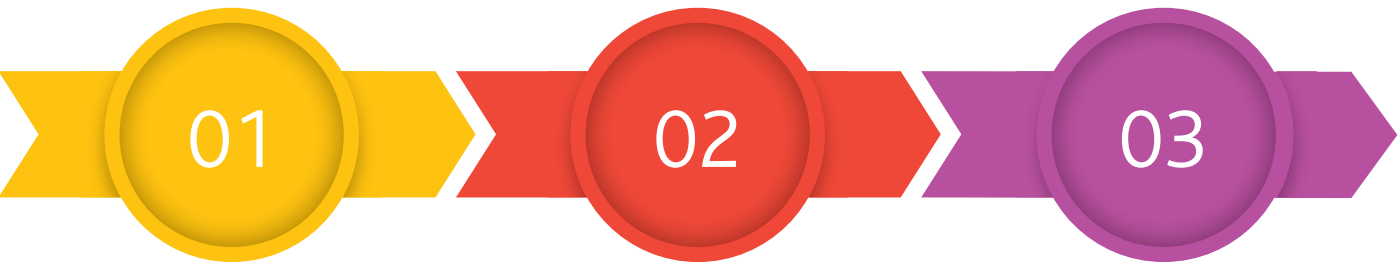
In addition to that AUK delivered INSET training to 278 teachers and other school staff over the year to help them support their adopted learners.

The NAS is proud of its commitment to supporting staff. Training during 2019/20 covered more than 30 subject areas which more than 300 staff attended. Examples include Dyadic Development Practice (DDP), which is based on and brings together attachment theory. The therapy helps children to learn trust.

MOVING FORWARD



Improvement priorities for 2020/21



Placing more children

- Increase recruitment of adopters to meet the number and needs of children waiting
- Use of 'Adopting Together' for children who wait longest
- Continue to embed the new Adoption Register for Wales to speed up matching of children through quicker notification of children and adopters in line with revised regulations.

Continuing to improve adoption support

- Implementing the Adoption Support Framework and investment plans
- Continuing to raise adoption awareness amongst professionals and the public.

Thinking ahead

- Working to improve the legal, policy and evidence framework that affects adoption
- Continuing to co-produce and use information from engagement
- Encouraging the development of workforce understanding and skills to meet NAS priorities
- Moving on from Covid-19 lockdown arrangements to the recovery/adaptive phase.

The National Adoption Service was created to improve services for all those affected by adoption in Wales.

The National Adoption Service (NAS) for Wales, launched in November 2014, is an innovative collaborative for the provision of adoption services. It brought together Welsh local authority adoption services into a three-tier structure which includes partnerships at all levels with Voluntary Adoption Agencies based in Wales, Health and Education Services, as well as others.

At local authority level, all 22 Welsh councils continue to provide services to all looked after children whilst identifying and working with those children for whom a plan for adoption is appropriate.

Regionally, local authorities work together within five regional collaboratives to provide a range of adoption services. Each regional collaborative has links with the voluntary adoption agencies, health and education. The services provided differ in each collaborative but all provide the adoption agency functions for children, recruit and assess adopters, offer counselling to birth parents and advice to adopted adults. Some currently directly provide adoption support services, whereas in others this remains with their local authorities.



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Agenda Item 7

Executive Committee and Council only

Date signed off by the Monitoring Officer: N/A

Date signed off by the Section 151 Officer: N/A

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **10th December 2020**

Report Subject: **Forward Work Programme: 21st January 2021**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr John Mason, Executive Member Social Services**

Report Submitted by: **Cllr Steve Thomas, Chair of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
x	x	25.11.20			10.12.20			

1. **Purpose of the Report**
 - 1.1 To present to Members the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme for the Meeting on 21st January 2021 for discussion and agreement.
2. **Scope and Background**
 - 2.1 The Scrutiny Work Programmes are key aspects of the Council's planning and governance arrangements and support the requirements of the Constitution.
 - 2.2 The topics set out in the Forward Work Programme link to the strategic work of the Council as identified by the Council's revised Corporate Plan, corporate documents and supporting business plans.
 - 2.3 Effective work programmes are essential to ensure that the work of scrutiny makes a positive impact upon the Council's delivery of services.
 - 2.4 The Committee's Forward Work Programme was agreed in September 2020, recognising the fluidity of the document to enable the Committee to respond to urgent and emerging issues, and included timescales when reports will be considered by the Committee. The work programme is managed and implemented by the Scrutiny and Democratic Officer under the direction of the Chair and Committee.
 - 2.5 The forward work programme for the forthcoming meeting will be presented to Committee on a 6 weekly cycle in order that Members can consider the programme of work; request information is included within the reports, as appropriate and / or make amendments to the work programme.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 **Option 1:** The Scrutiny Committee consider the Forward Work Programme for the meeting 21st January 2021, and

- Make any amendments to the topics scheduled for the meetings;
- Suggest any additional invitees that the committee requires to fully consider the reports; and
- Request any additional information to be included with regards to the topics to be discussed.

3.2 **Option 2:** The Scrutiny Committee agree the Forward Programme for the meeting 21st January 2021, as presented.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- Appendix 1 – Forward Work Programme – Meeting on 21st January 2021

Social Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme

Provisional Dates / Deadlines	Scrutiny Topic	Purpose (if known)	Lead Officer	Executive / Council Meeting
Thursday 21st January 2021 Deadline: Tuesday 5 th January 2021	1. Corporate Parenting Progress Report	Performance Monitoring Members to be informed of the progress made against the Corporate Parenting Action Plan.	Tanya Evans	Executive Information
	2. Community Meals	Performance Monitoring Members to be informed of the progress made since the transfer of the service to Social Services.	Alyson Hoskins	Executive

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